

SACRED TREE IN TIMES OF ANOMY: DEATH AND REGENERATION IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN FILMS

Evrin Ersöz Koç

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Sacred Tree in Times of Anomy:

Death and Regeneration in Twenty-First Century American Films

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PREFACE

The idea to write a book about the sacred tree in twenty-first-century American films was initiated with the experience of watching *The Fountain* by Aronofsky for the first time. I was moved by the touching, sad portrayal of death and amazed by the performances of Rachel Weisz and Hugh Jackman. Another issue that caught my attention in this film was how the tree, as text and visual, was like a third protagonist in addition to Weisz and Jackman. That was the time when my interest in the use of sacred tree symbolism began. Since then, I have noticed many sacred tree symbolisms in various visual narratives. There were many moments when I was watching a film, TV series, or music video and saw a reference to the mythical sacred tree and said “Here comes the tree again” to myself.

The sacred tree as a symbol or a motif is popular and prominent because it signifies regeneration and transcendence. Concerning how trees change from one season to another and how they reproduce blooming into new trees by seeds, trees are potent symbols of regeneration. Furthermore, trees, with their roots below and branches reaching above, become images of transcendence in cosmology. That’s why they are extensively used in visual narratives in which death and dying are the crises and the sacred tree is a symbol to make sense of these crises.

Having worked on the apocalypse as a theme in American theater in my PhD thesis, I have been interested in how mythical and religious schemas especially those related to cosmology, become a part of the human perception of the world and meaning-making process. When I became interested in the depiction of the sacred tree, I was already familiar with Mircea Eliade and the distinctions such as sacred/ profane and cosmos/chaos that he works on in *The Sacred and The Profane*. As I watched more films with sacred tree depictions, I also became interested in Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* in which another distinction

between nomos (order) and anomy (marginal situation threatening order) lays the groundwork for understanding the human need to believe the idea of a “sacred canopy” to cope with anomic situations.

This study, which concentrates on the portrayal of mythical sacred trees in American films and uses Mircea Eliade’s and Peter Berger’s investigations on sacred as a framework, is part of a field in which studies on religion and cinema intersect. Focusing on twenty-first-century American films, this study investigates how trees emerge as symbols of sacred in films in which the characters struggle with grief, pain, and meaninglessness because the reality of death or dying confronts them. As a symbol of regeneration, the sacred tree signifies the existence of a nonhomogenous vast transcendent cosmological schema and offers these characters a way to make sense of their suffering.

I am grateful to my brother Utku Ersöz who took a picture of the branches of the old oak tree on my grandfather’s land in his village Yeşilyurt in Muğla, Turkey. Using this picture of the old oak tree on the cover of the book is meaningful for me. My grandfather planted this tree when my father was a small kid and since then we have spent a lot of time under it. Under this tree, we as a family still get together, sit, and talk about the old days. This book is dedicated to my grandparents Abdurrahim Ersöz, Nazife Ersöz, Ali Özen, Bedia Özen, and my aunt Hayriye Cömert who, although departed from this world, stand tall in our memories like this old oak tree and are never forgotten.

I offer my thanks to my best friends Gaye Gökalp Yılmaz, Ceren Altun, Burcu Sılaydın, and Gülnaz Hoccoğlu Öztürk, my parents Esat Ersöz, and Habibe Ersöz, my husband Serkan Koç and my dear precious daughter Zeynep Alya Koç for their support, encouragement, and motivation. I always feel lucky and grateful to have them in my life.

INTRODUCTION

Humans have been sharing their lives on earth with other organisms such as animals, plants, and trees since the dawn of civilization. Trees have provided shelter and protection for primitive man and since then the ways humans use the trees, share the landscape with the trees, and attribute meaning to trees have evolved as well. Trees are thankfully always there and because they have been a witness and a part of human's perception and meaning-making process, they are both physical and symbolic entities in the human world. As elements of nature and symbols, trees have been an issue in anthropological studies such as E. Durkheim and M. Mauss's *Primitive Classification* and M. Douglas's *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (Rival, 1998, p. 1-3). Maurice Bloch's essay "Why Trees, too, are Good to Think with: Towards an Anthropology of the Meaning of Life" attempts to answer what makes trees suitable objects for symbolisation (1998, p. 39). Trees are "good to think with" and the symbolic value of trees extends anthropological and sociological studies and holds a venue in studies on religion and myth such as J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Mircea Eliade's investigation of mythical religious cosmological schemas and the idea of sacred in his many books.

Such a powerful tree symbolism that has been a subject of anthropological and sociological studies and studies on myth and religion is poignantly represented in art, literature, and cinema. In cinema, there are famous trees that extend to genres of drama, horror, and fantasy, and they sometimes incorporate archetypal figures such as wise old wo/man and sometimes play roles in initiation stories. Among them are Groot in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Treebeard in *The Lord of the Rings*, Toad Tree in *Pan's Labyrinth*, The Whomping Willow in *Harry Potter*, Possessed Tree in *Evil Dead*, Grandmother Willow in *Pocahontas*, Apples Trees

in *The Wizard of Oz*, The Demon Tree in *Poltergeist*, and Tree of Life in *The Lion King* (McHale, 2020; Gray, 2021)¹.

This study, focusing on twenty-first-century American films, argues that trees emerge as symbols of sacred in films in which the characters grapple with grief, pain, and meaninglessness because the reality of death or dying confronts them. Following careful research on twenty-first-century American films that use trees as symbols and works on the subject of death and dying, this study analyzes three films: *The Fountain* (2006) directed by Darren Aronofsky, *The Tree of Life* (2011) directed by Terrence Malick, and *Miracles from Heaven* (2016) directed by Patricia Riggen. Aronofsky's *The Fountain* presents a romance in which a couple confronts death and dying: the cancer-stricken Izzi who has to face dying, and the scientist Tom who does everything to save Izzi and struggles to process his pain after her death. The film that presents the romance in an epic style, in which the romance extends to different timelines in different centuries, dominantly uses the sacred tree as a symbol as the characters deal with death, dying, and grief. The other film is Malick's *The Tree of Life* which presents Jack O'Brien's memories in Waco, Texas, and his need to make sense of the death of his brother. The film portrays the O'Brien's past as well as their grief juxtaposing it to the past of the whole universe establishing micro-macro relations. In this epic portrayal, as the title hints, the trees hold a significant role as symbols of the sacred providing a motif of transcendence. In *Miracles from Heaven*, based on a memoir, Riggen delves into the story of another Texas family, the Beams, and the hard times that await them as the ten-year-old Anna is diagnosed with pseudo-obstruction motility disorder. This film is different from the other two because the girl is miraculously healed after a fall into the hollow tree in the garden; still, the film is rich in explicating the problem of suffering. Despite the differences, there are striking similarities among the three films. Using the tree as a symbol poignantly and predominantly in relation to the mythical Tree of Life, they all engage with spiritual and psychological crises because of an encounter with the reality of death and dying.

An analysis of American films in which the tree emerges as a symbol in a plot not necessarily covering death, dying, and grief as the dominant issue would include two other films. One is *Trees of Peace* directed by Alanna Brown which centers on the story of four different women who have to hide in a hole in the underground of a house to be protected from the terror amid genocide

¹ There are countless examples of tree symbolism and/or motifs in many other films. These examples are selected from among the most popular and well-known ones.

against the Tutsi in Rwanda. In this film, the tree emerges as a symbol of peace. The other film is *Avatar* directed by James Cameron, which portrays the issues of exploitation and colonization in which the protagonist learns about the animistic Na'vi culture in Pandora. In the beautiful, animistic landscape of Pandora, sacred extends everywhere infused with the divine entity called Eywa, and the trees—The Tree of Voices, Tree of Souls, and Home Tree—are also parts of it. In both films, there are anomic situations, the genocide in *Trees of Peace*, and the colonization in *Avatar*; however, either the main anomy is not the death of a loved one or the tree symbolism is not a derivation from the mythical Tree of Life.

Also, three other films may be included in this study, if it was not limited to films produced in America or directed by Americans. One of them is *The Tree* directed by Julie Bertucelli in which the eight-year-old Simone, after her father's death believes that her father speaks to her through the tree in their garden. Another movie is *A Monster Calls* directed by Juan Antonio Bayona, in which a tree monster accompanies and supports the twelve-year-old Conor who tries to deal with not only her mother's fatal disease but also being bullied at school. Both films are coming-of-age stories in which the children's experience of grief is illustrated with tree symbolism. Moreover, the tree appears as a symbol in the animated film *The Book of Life* directed by Jorge R. Gutierrez that depicts the story of a protagonist coming from a family of bullfighters but willing to be a singer. The movie presents his journey to find his love in fantastical realms including the afterlife.

This study, concentrating on the portrayal and function of mythical sacred trees in American films, is part of a field in which studies on religion and cinema intersect. For this reason, a brief background on the rise of studies on religion and film makes sense. Such a background is richly and densely available in such books as *The Religion and Film Reader*, edited by Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate; *Representing Religion in Film*, edited by Tenzan Eaghll and Rebekka King; *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, by John C. Lyden; *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the 'Genuinely' Religious Film* by Sheila J. Nayar; *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, edited by S. Brent Plate; *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, by S. Brent Plate; *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus*, by Antonio D. Sison; *Religion and Film: An Introduction*, by Melanie J. Wright; and *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad

E. Ostwalt Jr.

In *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, Plate draws attention to the parallelism between film-making and religion-making both of which “are bound under the general guise of *worldmaking*” (2017, p. xiv):

Films and religions arise from and play themselves out within specific cultures, yet each can be generically recognized in spite of cultural differences because each uses the same tools and raw materials. I am not blithely eliding cultural differences here, simply saying that no matter what culture films come from they are made with cameras and projectors and come into being through procedures such as cinematography and editing. The same is true of the myths, rituals, and symbols of religious traditions: even if drastically different from setting to setting, all religions seem to include some form of them as part of their tradition. (2017, p. xiv)

Just as cinema uses tools such as cameras and projectors with cinematography and editing techniques, religion uses myths, rituals, and symbols. From this perspective, “the relation between religion and film is as old as cinema itself” (Plate, 2017, p. xiv); however, the academic interest in this relation is a recent progress. Plate examines the critical academic enterprise of religion and film in three waves. In the first wave, covering the period from the late 1960s to the 1980s, with a humanistic approach inspired by Paul Tillich’s theology of culture, the studies investigate the human condition in the works by auteurs such as Pasolini, Dreyer, Bresson, Bergman, etc. In the second wave, beginning in the late 1980s, the scholars criticizing the earlier interest in “serious” art house film, initiates an interest in popular Hollywood films. These two waves, the first focusing on art films and the second focusing on popular films, “emphasize the verbal narratives of the films” and are similar to literary interpretations. In the third wave of the past two decades, there are two primary concerns: one is the shift in film analysis which not only centers on literary interpretation but also includes film criticism and theory, and the other is the outpouring of audience reception theory that explores “how the viewing of film itself is similar to participation in religious ceremonies” (Plate, 2017, pp. xv-xvi).²

² Plate considers his book as a part of the third wave and refers to the other third-wave works such as Johnston’s *Reframing Theology and Film*, Lyden’s *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, Marsh’s *Cinema and Sentiment: Film’s Challenge to Theology*, Meyer’s *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana*, and

Similar to the three-wave historical analysis of the studies on religion and cinema, there is a popular and useful thematic three-fold categorization provided in *Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, which is a significant contribution to the field that concentrates on the intersection between film studies and religion studies. Even though the approaches to the study of religion are diverse, Martin in “Introduction: Seeing the Sacred on the Screen,” offers a basic three-fold category that includes the theological, the mythological, and the ideological approaches. The contributors’ essays that analyze films from religious perspectives are grouped according to this categorization in this book.

In the theological approach, theologians “analyze how religious texts and thinkers in various traditions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, have talked about God” (Martin, 1995, p. 6). In the mythological approach, mainly those scholars interested in the study of comparative religion, “do not equate religion with monotheistic religions or with any single tradition, deity, belief, or institution. Rather they see religion as universal and ubiquitous human activity; they assert that religion manifests itself through cross-cultural forms, including myth, ritual, systems of purity, and gods” (Martin, 1995, p.6). In the ideological approach, critics (the editors call them “ideological critics”) interpret religion in relation to “the social structure, the unconscious, gender, and power relations” mainly focusing on “how religion legitimates or challenges dominant visions of the social order” (Martin, 1995, p.7).

The authors grouped under the heading Theological Criticism tend to equate religion with specific religious traditions (e.g., Christianity and its scriptures). The authors grouped under the heading Mythological Criticism tend to define religion more broadly in terms of universal mythic archetypes (e.g., the figure of the sky god). The authors grouped under Ideological Criticism focus on the political and social effects of religion (e.g., its ability to convince dominated people to accept or resist their lot). (Martin, 1995, p. 7)

Thus, the ways these scholars work on religion vary: theologians concentrate on the teachings related to *theos* in specific religious traditions, mythologists or those interested in comparative religion focus on universal archetypes in broad

schemas of religion, and “ideological critics” examine religion and society with a focus on power relations and different forms of domination.

Martin further refers to other scholars who provide a similar tripartite framework for the studies on religion. These scholars are William Padden who offers a tripartite typology including Christian comparativism, universalism, and rationalism in *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*, and Catherine Albanese who suggests a three-fold typology including substantive, formal, and functional in *America: Religions and Religion*. Even though the typologies provided by Martin, Padden, and Albanese are similar in having three-fold categorizations, the contents of each category are not essentially the same. Martin further notes that even though the classification in *Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* may not be exactly the same as those in Padden’s and Albanese’s typologies, the similarities prove how such a classification is not “arbitrary” or “artificial”:

Substantive, formal, functional; Christian comparativism, universalism, rationalism; theological, mythological, ideological. Although our typology does not exactly parallel those of Paden and Albanese, these similarities across the subfields of religious studies convince us that our classification system is not arbitrary or artificial. Although we employ our tripartite system only to explore the relation of religion and film, it could be useful in the broader study of religion and culture. Indeed, we are tempted to think that this classification system makes a theoretical contribution to the field of religious studies. It may provide a useful means of interpreting our culture’s running dialogue with religious values, themes, archetypes, and narratives. It could enable us to examine this dialogue from three critical perspectives. It definitely helps us to analyze some of the key ways religion and film are related. (Martin, 1995, p. 8).

Considering this tripartite classification of the studies on religion and film, this study, concentrating on tree symbolism in films portraying issues of death, dying, and mourning belongs to the mythological approach. Martin further explains the mythological approach introducing Eliade and Campbell as renowned scholars contributing to this approach:

A more inclusive, cross-cultural understanding of religion is exemplified in the works of scholars of comparative mythology. As

Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and others have argued, religion can be defined in a nontheological manner as the quest of humanity for contact with the sacred. Such a definition leads myth critics to search for religion in all cultures, in art and architecture, in dreams, in all symbolic activities, and especially in mythic narratives-stories that reveal the foundational values of a culture. (Martin, 1995, p. 9).

As Martin states, Eliade and Campbell are among the figures that the scholars mainly use to analyze films from a mythological perspective. This study analyzes the films focusing on the tree symbolism as a part of “the quest of humanity for contact with the sacred” as stated in the above quotation. As already pointed out by Martin (1995, p. 9) and Eaghll & King (2022; p. 7), Eliade comments on how myth and religion are employed in cinema, in his terms “dream factory”:

A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads. The cinema, that “dream factory,” takes over and employs countless mythical motifs-the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisaical landscape, hell, and so on) (Eliade, 1959, p. 205)

Therefore, according to Eliade, the sacred and its manifestation in different mythologies are also represented in the various plots of “dream factory” because “modern man still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals” (1959, p. 204).³

Even though Eliade, “is criticized today in many social-scientific and humanistic circles, his book *The Sacred and The Profane* “remains one of the most plumbed, discussed, and cited books on the subject” (Nayar, 2012, p. 14). As articulated by Nayar in *The Sacred and The Cinema: Reconfiguring The ‘Genuinely’ Religious Film*, Eliade’s *The Sacred and The Profane* “is a work considered “a must-read by anthropologists and historians of religion, even if their only purpose is to discredit it. But one can hardly ignore Eliade’s

3 This quote is also a part of Eliade’s discussion on the primitive vs. modern man or religious vs. nonreligious man. Eliade throughout *The Sacred and The Profane* comments that how men of traditional/religious societies are different from men of modern /nonreligious societies in their perception of the universe; still, the modern men inherit from men of traditional societies. This idea would be briefly introduced in the first chapter of this study.

scholarship” (2012, p. 14). Nayar says that her work is indebted to Eliade’s insight and rather than critiquing his work, Nayar’s study *recuperates* it (2012, p. 14). Nayar is certainly not the only scholar who emphasizes the significance of Eliade’s insight and how such an insight provides a good lens through which to analyze films. Eliade’s analysis of the sacred, especially the term “hierophany” to explain the manifestation of the sacred is used as a theoretical lens in studies such as Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dryer*, Bird’s “Film as Hierophany,” Hardy’s “Film, Spirituality and Hierophany,” and Yamada’s “Teaching Hierophany through Film and Film through Hierophany”.

In exploring the tree as an element of sacred, this study uses Eliade’s insight on the one hand and Peter Berger’s scrutiny of the sacred in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* on the other. By attributing sacred reality to the cosmos, Berger discusses, how the institution of religion builds meaning for humans who sometimes fall into depths of meaninglessness when confronted with anomic situations. The anomic situation that is the subject of this study is death; Berger and Eliade provide a good framework for understanding how the idea of the sacred plays a role in healing and consoling humans by reorienting them into meaningful existence in the cosmos.

Some studies on cinema intersect with the studies on sacred (Babington, & Evans 1993; Detweiler, 2008; Genoskoi 2003; Khachab, 2013; Kozlovic, 2007; Martin & Ostwalt, 1995; Nayar, 2012) or death, dying, and grief (Armstrong, 2012; Brown, 2009; Fung, 2013; Genelli L. & Genelli T. D., 2013; Hagin, 2010; McInerney, 2009; Niemiec, & Schulenberg 2011; Schultz & Huet, 2000; Sullivan & Greenberg, 2013; Velasco, 2004). This study combines the two lenses – sacred and death – concentrating on how the tree emerges as a symbol of the sacred giving the human pain on earth a dimension of transcendence.

Such an analysis that centers on the symbolic role of the mythical tree in films in which the subject is death or mourning, the style, in addition to the narrative plot, is equally important. The scholars who are interested in the revelation of the sacred in cinema have outlined the significance of style. One of the most significant studies is *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dryer* by Schrader, renowned film director and critic. In this book, Schrader analyzes and defines the transcendental style as “neither ineffable, nor invisible” though it “strives toward the ineffable and invisible” (1972, p. 3). For Schrader, transcendental style is visible, since it “uses precise temporary means—camera

angles, dialogue editing—for predetermined transcendental ends” (1972, pp. 3-4). In addition to this definition, Bird also stresses the significance of style, saying “what is required in a cinematic theology is a consideration of how the style of film can enable an exploration of the sacred” (1982, pp. 13-14)⁴. Probably as an outcome of such callings in the 1970s and 1980s, recent studies are more careful about analyzing styles. Commenting on the changes in recent decades, Lyden articulates that “Scholars who write about religion and film are better schooled in film studies and so have brought their knowledge of filmmaking to their research, offering analyses of the art of the film that transcend its narrative structure and look rather at how film techniques can convey meanings and affect audiences” (2019, p. 1). Also, Plate in the introduction of *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* highlights that the contributors’ essays include analysis of both narrative and style posing questions such as

What happens in the plot of the film? What is the effect of the mise-en-scene or cinematography? Why did the production designer use one color and not another? How is a character transformed within the story of the film? And, more to the point, how are religious practices, myths, and symbols evoked within the film? How is religion represented, and thus mediated? (2003, p. 4).

This study poses similar questions: How does death appear as a part of the plots? Which mythical trees do the films refer to? How does the tree as a symbol of sacred appear as a part of narrative and style? Do the characters change, and learn to make sense of death and suffering, and if so, how? How do the choices in cinematography and mise-en-scene contribute to portraying sacred and transcendence? To answer these questions, the first part of the study explains the symbolic values of the tree in relation to the idea of sacred, using mainly Eliade’s and Berger’s views while the second part offers a detailed analysis of the symbolic sacred tree in *The Fountain*, *The Tree of Life* and *Miracles from Heaven* in which the answers to the above questions are found.

⁴ Sison criticizes Bird for failing to fulfill what he offers: “It is ironic that while Bird rightly laments the chronic oversight in the Theology-Cinema landscape, his own essay in the collection, an exploration of the religious perspective palpable in the works of Swedish auteur Ingmar Bergman, skirts the very key question he deems as essential: style” (2006, p. 5).

CHAPTER 1

THE SACRED TREE IN TIMES OF ANOMY

Since the need for the definition of sacred is a key point in the study, this part initially introduces the concept of the sacred in major texts written by Emile Durkheim, Otto Rudolf, and Mircea Eliade. Then moving from general to specific, the focus turns towards the sacred tree, its function as a religious symbol, meanings, and variations in different myths and religious traditions from an Eliadean perspective. This part is finalized with a touch upon Peter Berger's exploration of the role of religion in providing a sacred reality for society especially helping its members find meaning in hard times, what Berger calls anomy. This three-fold analysis of the sacred, sacred tree, sacred in times of anomy would thereby provide a theoretical lens to analyze the films that use the symbolic tree in their portrayals of anomic death in the next chapter.

1. An Overview of the Sacred: E. Durkheim, R. Otto, and M. Eliade

The notion of the sacred is a dimension through which a human being –as a part of a community/society and/or as a member of a belief system—perceives and experiences life. Defining the concept of the sacred has been a major concern, especially in religion, sociology, anthropology, phenomenology, and philosophy. Although their frameworks vary, scholars such as Rudolf Otto, Emile Durkheim, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, Bronislaw Malinowski, Peter Berger, Roger Caillois, etc. have contributed a lot to elucidating the concept of the sacred. These studies from different frameworks sometimes overlap and sometimes diverge from

each other, and even sometimes blame and criticize the other for reductionism⁵.

This study, concentrating on how the symbolic sacred tree motif as a mythical archetype appears in American films that portray images of death, rebirth, mourning, and grief, benefits mostly from the ideas of the great thinker Mircea Eliade and the renowned sociologist Peter Berger. Still, a study based on a mythological perspective inspired by Eliade and Berger may provide a basic introduction to Emile Durkheim's analysis of the sacred from a sociological point of view and Rudolf Otto's analysis of the sacred from a theological and mythological lens because despite their differences, all those analyses build upon each other.

Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

One of the scholars—certainly not the first—who thoroughly analyzes the concept of the sacred is the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (first published in 1912), he advocates that studying primitive religion is a tool to understand what religion is in general (2008, p. 6). Even though his work concentrates on totemism among the Aborigines of Australia, he begins his analysis with an effort to make an all-inclusive definition of religion, one that would encompass simple, primitive, complex, and contemporary forms of religion.

Attempting to arrive at an all-inclusive definition of religion, Durkheim primarily examines earlier definitions that identify religion with its emphasis on the elements of supernatural, mystery, or divinity. Advocating that these definitions are not all-inclusive, he provides his definition beginning with the explanation of religious phenomena as consisting of beliefs and rites (2008, p. 36). In his definition of religion, the word *sacred* and its counterpart *profane* appear as key terms:

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present a common quality: they presuppose a classification of things—the real or ideal things that men represent for themselves—into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the words *profane* and *sacred*. The

⁵ For more on reductionism, see *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion*, edited by T. Idinopulos and E. Yonan.

division of the world into two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane, is the hallmark of religious thought. (2008, p. 36)

Durkheim's definition then rests on the idea that all religious beliefs include a classification pattern that identifies things as either sacred or profane. Then he defines what goes to the sacred domain.

Beliefs, myths, gnomic spirits, and legends are either representations or systems of representation that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, their relations with each other and with profane things. But sacred things should not be taken to mean simply those personal beings we call gods or spirits. A rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in other words anything at all, can be sacred. A rite can have this sacred character as well; in fact, no rite exists that does not have it to some degree. (2008, p. 36-37)

For Durkheim, sacred things are not only limited to beings related to divinity or spirits and may cover an element in nature such as a rock, tree, stone, etc, or an element in culture such as a rite. All those examples of sacred things are in opposition to profane things. Durkheim further explains what distinguishes these two opposite categories. One of the possible ways for such a distinguishment is to concentrate on how the sacred things "are generally assigned in the hierarchy of beings" since the sacred things "are regarded as superior in dignity and power to profane things" (2008, p. 37). However, such a pattern of hierarchy or subordination is not enough to make something or somebody sacred because such patterns may refer to relations that are not properly religious (2008, p. 37). Durkheim, warning that a hierarchical distinction may be too general or too vague, asserts that it is still "the only way to define the relation between the sacred and the profane is their heterogeneity" (2008, p. 38). This heterogeneity is *absolute*: "There is no other example in the history of human thought of two categories of things so profoundly undifferentiated or so radically opposed to one another" (2008, p. 38). Such opposition is not only absolute but also universal: even though the forms of the contrast between the two categories vary in different religions, these two realms always contrast. Although the sacred realm is the opposite of the profane realm, the passage between the two contrasting realms is possible and the rites of initiation are examples of such passages (2008, p. 38). "Religious beliefs are representations that express the nature of sacred things and

the relations they sustain among themselves or with profane things. Finally, rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things” (2008, p. 40).

Durkheim also provides a comparative analysis between magic and religion. Both have beliefs and rites; despite this similarity, Durkheim underlines that religion and magic are different because religious beliefs are “held by a defined collectivity”, and magic, even though it may be popular and widespread, “does not bind its followers to one another” (2008, p. 42-43). Following this comparative analysis, Durkheim arrives at his final definition: “*a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions-beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church*” (2008, p. 46). Thus, Durkheim’s definition of religion emphasizes two key points: the beliefs including the contrast between the sacred and profane things, and the collectivity that is the idea that “religion must be something eminently collective” (2008, p. 46).

Having defined religion emphasizing the elements of “beliefs and rites relative to sacred things” and “collectivity”, Durkheim searches for elementary religion. He rejects the earlier theories on the origin of religion such as animism especially outlined by Edward Tyler and naturism explained by Max Muller, since both “try to construct the notion of divine from the sensations awakened in us by certain natural phenomena” (2008, p. 77). The animists focus on the dream, while the naturists focus on cosmic manifestations but “for both the seed of the great divide between the sacred and the profane must be sought in nature—in the nature of man or the nature of the universe” (2008, p. 77). Durkheim criticizes such an undertaking because it “assumes a veritable creation *ex nihilo*” and examines animists and naturists to “view religion as the product of a delirious interpretation” (2008, p. 77). Following this examination, Durkheim ponders:

Since neither man nor nature is inherently sacred, this quality of sacredness must come from another source. Outside the human individual and the physical world, then, there must be some other reality in which the kind of delirium that characterizes all religion, in a sense, takes on meaning and objective value. (2008, p. 77)

Durkheim finds this “other reality” in totemism. For Durkheim, instead of animism and naturism, the elementary religion is totemism since the elements he proposes in his definition of religion such as beliefs and rites including the distinction between

the sacred and the profane and the collectivity are evident in totemism.

For Durkheim, the most primitive and simplest religion is totemism in Australian tribes. The collective life in Australian tribes rests on the clan in which membership is determined by a bond of kinship based not on blood relations but on relations to a definite species of material things (2008, p. 88). “The species that designates the clan collectively is called *totem*” and the totemic objects “belong to either the plant or animal kingdom” (2008, p. 88-89). The totem is not only a name (of an animal or a plant) or an emblem reproduced on walls, canoes, weapons, tools tombs, and bodies of clan members, it is a “collective label” that has a religious character due to their use in religious rites: “things are classified as sacred and profane in relation to totem’s religious character. It is the classic example of a sacred thing” (2008, p. 95-96). The totemic objects used in religious rites are called *churingas*⁶ which are “pieces of wood or bits of polished stone varying in shape” (2008, p. 96). Each *churinga* is supremely sacred and displayed in a special place into which profane people are not allowed. Therefore, the sanctity of the totemic object is transferred into the space and for that reason, it should be “shielded from contamination by the profane” (2008, p. 96). Therefore, the totem stands as an entity substituting the idea of sacred for the primitive human mind. As the reification of the abstract from of sacred, the totem results in a sacred/profane distinction in both human mind and human experience of space.

The rest of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is a detailed analysis of central totemic beliefs and ritual conduct. Durkheim defines religion as emphasizing the beliefs and rites concerning sacred profane dichotomy and collectivity and declares totemism as an elementary religion. Durkheim also mentions that such an analysis of totemism as an elementary religion is at odds with Frazer who sees totemism not as a religion but as a magical system (2008, p. 136). However, according to Durkheim, “[t]here is religion when the sacred is distinguished from the profane” and “totemism is a vast system of sacred things” (2008, p. 136).

The definition of religion and the concept of sacred in relation to those definitions in sociological, anthropological, and ethnological studies vary. Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is rich in comparisons to earlier studies such as Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) and Sir James Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1890). Furthermore, Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski’s

⁶ Durkheim, noting that these objects “according to Spencer and Gillen, are called *churingas*, and according to Strehlow, *tjurungas*.” (96), uses the term *churinga* throughout his book.

“Magic, Science and Religion” (1925) and Roger Caillois’s *Man and the Sacred* (1939) are among the prominent studies further exploring the sacred. In this study, Durkheim’s approach is chosen as an exemplary rich exploration of the significance of the sacred in the sociology of religion.

Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*

As Nayar expresses, “Around the same time that Durkheim was formulating his ideas from the sociological angle, Rudolf Otto was doing so in theological and philosophical terms.” (2012, p. 20). *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, written by the acclaimed theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto is a significant contribution to studies on religion. As the book’s long subtitle specifies, Otto’s inquiry into the conceptualization of divinity is based on the different rational and non-rational elements. In theistic conceptions of God, if the attributes applied to God are grasped by the intellect and analyzed by thought, the nature of the deity is rational, and this nature is a part of a rational religion (1936, p. 1). “(T)he criterion of a religion’s high rank and superior value” is based on the fact that belief is not solely based on *feeling* and “it should have no lack of *conceptions* about God”, in other words, it should be rational (1936, p. 1). Otto primarily clarifies that Christianity, since it is full of such conceptions, is a superior religion (1936, p. 1).

Stressing the superior rank of Christianity, Otto also warns against an error in viewing the deity “completely and exhaustively in such ‘rational’ attributes” (1936, p. 2). Referring to the “traditional language of edification” in sermons, theological instructions, and holy scriptures, in which “‘rational’ element occupies the foreground,” Otto argues that “expositions of religious truth in language inevitably tend to stress the ‘rational’ attributes of God” (1936, p. 2). For instance, according to Otto, ignoring the nonrational elements led to a one-sidedly intellectualistic and rationalistic interpretation of the idea of God (1936, p. 3). It is not only Orthodox Christianity that stresses the rational elements; “the bias to rationalization still prevails” in theology, comparative religion, and the studies in mythology and religion of ‘primitive man’ (1936, p. 3). Thus, Otto declares that both rational and non-rational elements should be taken into consideration: “Religion is not exclusively contained and exhaustively comprised

in any series of ‘rational’ assertions; and it is well worth while to attempt to bring the relation of the different ‘moments’ of religion to one another clearly before the mind, so that its nature may become more manifest” (1936, p. 4). Thus, for Otto, for a better grasp of the nature of religion, not only rational but also non-rational elements in religion should be inspected. To do so, Otto chooses to delve into “the quite distinctive category of the holy or the sacred” (1936, p. 4).

Otto explains that the words *holy*, *sacred* (*heilig*) include a rational element, with meaning as ‘completely good’; however, in addition to moral goodness, these words further include an addition, an extra, an “unnamed Something” (1936, pp. 5-6). For this reason, Otto stresses the need to find a term “to stand for ‘the holy’ *minus* its moral factor or ‘moment’, and . . . *minus* its ‘rational’ aspect altogether” (1936, p. 6). This term is *numen* and Otto also suggests an adjective form as *numinous* saying, “*Omen* has given us *ominous*, and there is no reason why from *numen* we should not similarly form a word ‘*numinous*’” (1936, p. 7). Thus, endeavoring to make a more inclusive definition of sacred that would integrate rational and non-rational elements, Otto develops the term *numen* and its adjective form *numinous*.

Delving into the non-rational element of *holy/sacred*,⁷ Otto explains the elements in the “numinous” one by one. The first element is the *creature feeling*. To illustrate this, Otto refers to a well-known example from Genesis: “When Abraham ventures to plead with God for the men of Sodom, he says (Genesis xviii. 27): ‘Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes.’” (1936, pp. 9-10). In the analysis of those lines, Otto reminds Schleiermacher’s concept of the “feeling of dependence”. Otto claims that since those lines indicate more than merely a feeling of dependence, he needs to propose his own terminology. Otto chooses to use the terms “creature-consciousness” or creature feeling (1936, pp. 9-10) that “is the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (1936, p. 10). This feeling, “of self-abasement into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind”, Otto assures, is felt in the presence of the numinous, and from this perspective, the “numinous is thus felt as objective and outside the self” (1936, p. 11).

Then Otto moves to the nature of the numinous and its manifestation and focuses on three key terms: *mysterium tremendum*, *mysterium*, and *mysterium*

⁷ Otto explains that since his analysis focuses on non-rational elements or feelings, the readers devoid of “a deeply -felt religious experience”, “is requested to read no further” (1936, p. 8).

*fascinans*⁸. Otto begins with the description of *mysterium tremendum*:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its' profane non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. (1936, pp. 12-13)

There are three elements in *mysterium tremendum* and the first one Otto explains is the element of awefulness. Despite the familiarity between the terms *tremor* and *fear*, the *mysterium tremendum* is distinct from being afraid; for this reason, Otto suggests that “awe” and “aweful” are closer to the meaning he is after. (1936, pp. 13-14). Awe or religious dread has different forms in the flow of religious progress but it is always there. Its primitive form at the antecedent stage is daemonic dread, the dread of ghosts is a later off-shoot and in the repetition of the word “Holy, holy, holy “Holy” in Christian worship, it turns into “mystical awe” releasing creature feeling (1936, pp. 15-18). In addition to the element of awe that has always been present in different forms, *mysterium tremendum* also includes overpoweringness (*majestas*). Otto describes this element as “the feeling of one’s own abasement . . . and nothingness” which “forms the numinous raw material for the feeling of religious humility”⁹(1936, p. 20). Lastly, *mysterium tremendum* includes the element of energy or urgency of the numinous object that “recur again again from the daemonic level up to

⁸ The term “mysterium fascinans” widely used in the studies on Otto’s typology, appears as “the element of fascination” in *The Idea of the Holy*. The word “fascinans” is used but there is no use of “mysterium fascinans” in the book. The title of the chapters are as follows: “Chapter IV Mysterium Tremendum,” “Chapter V The Analysis of ‘Mysterium,’” and “Chapter VI The Element of Fascination”. Even though the term “mysterium fascinans” does not appear in the book; I use it here for once because it is widespread in the studies on Otto most of which refers to Otto’s typology as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. For a discussion on the use of “mysterium fascinans” also, see <https://www.bytrentsacred.co.uk/index.php/rudolf-otto/the-rudolf-otto-virus> .

⁹ For religious humility, Otto refers to Marett’s “The Birth of Humility”.

the idea of the ‘living’ God (1936, p. 23).

Otto explains *mysterium* in comparison to *mysterium tremendum*; in the latter, there is *tremor* but in the former, there is *stupor* that “signifies “blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute” (1936, p. 26). In the religious sense, *mysterium* refers to “the wholly other. . . which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’, and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment” (1936, p. 26).

For Otto, the third element is “fascinans,” the element of fascination that definitely contrasts the element of *mysterium tremendum*. The two elements maintain a dual character since the numinous experience may be both daunting and fascinating and this dual character of the numinous experience is noticeable in different phases of religious development (1936, p. 31). For a person experiencing the element of fascination, the numen shows itself attractive, fascinating, alluring, and charming (1936, p. 31). For this person, the mystery is not something to be wondered about (as in the experience of *mysterium*) but something entrancing, bewildering, confounding, captivating, and transporting with a strange ravishment (1936, p. 31). The religious bliss or element of fascination is evident in the religions of salvation, but Otto provides further examples of such feelings and beautiful experiences in mysticism, Buddhism, asceticism, and Christianity in different forms. With the help of this classification of the concepts *mysterium*, *tremendum*, and *fascinans*, Otto unfolds numinous as a part of the long-neglected or ignored non-rational dimension of sacred.

Otto is a significant theologian and a devout Christian obvious in his use of pronouns such as “we the Christians” “our Holy Scriptures” and his praises for higher ranks of Christianity. Moreover, he is a master at the history of religion because his book does not only concentrate on Christianity or the Bible, he also analyzes the flow of religious progress and examines the religions of primitive men, mythology, mysticism, asceticism, Buddhism as well. Such an examination results in a profound analysis of the non-rational element of the sacred, the numinous experience in *The Idea of the Holy*.

Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and The Profane*

Mircea Eliade is an eminent and prolific historian of religion and philosopher who provides significant insight into mythical and religious symbolism. In addition to his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, and *Myth and Reality*, one of his studies in which Eliade analyzes different dimensions of mythic and religious experience is *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959) that is a brilliant scrutiny on the concept of sacred. In the very first lines of *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade praises Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* for its new and original point of view and psychological subtlety (1959, p. 8). After introducing Otto's terminology such as *numinous*, *mysterium tremendum*, *majestas*, and *mysterium fascinans*, Eliade states that, instead of focusing on the non-rational elements in religion as Otto's study, his study concentrates on "the phenomenon of the sacred in all its complexity" "*in its entirety*" (1959, p. 10). The first definition that Eliade proposes for "the *sacred* is that it is the opposite of the profane" (1959, p. 10). The very first definition of the term highlights how Eliade's study, in addition to his praise for Otto's work, recalls Durkheim's analysis of the sacred, since both Eliade and Durkheim begin with the dichotomy between the sacred and profane.¹⁰ Eliade and Durkheim "though differing profoundly in their methodologies, both based much of their approach to the study of religion on the sacred/profane distinction" (Cusack, 2011, p. 6).

Having settled the opposition between the sacred and the profane, Eliade describes one of the key terms in his study, *hierophany*: "Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*" (1959, p. 11)¹¹. In the history of religions covering the most primitive and highly developed forms of religions, the hierophanies vary: the sacred may manifest in an ordinary object such as a stone or a tree or it can be a supreme hierophany such as the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in Christianity (1959, p. 11). In hierophanies, there is always the same mysterious

¹⁰ Codoban compares Eliade's idea of the sacred to Durkheim's and Otto's ideas: "Rudolf Otto (1926, pp. 8-13) undertakes a phenomenological description of the sacred rather than a definition of it. Paradoxically in his definition of the sacred Eliade appears to be closer to Durkheim in as much as he opposes it to the profane. But this correlative definition is merely introductory and its purpose is to underline the fact that the sacred and the profane are two opposite and irreconcilable ways for humans to live in the world." (1998, p. 85).

¹¹ The expression "wholly different" in this sentence is a reference to Otto's explanation for numinous experience.

act: “the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world” (1959, p. 11). Eliade explains the paradox represented by hierophanies through the example of a sacred stone: the stone remains itself a part of the surrounding cosmic milieu but the stone also becomes something else, becomes a hierophany since “its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality” (1959, p. 12).

According to Eliade, there are two modes of being in the world—sacred and profane—and these two modes concern not only the history of religions or sociology but also philosophy since “the *sacred* and *profane* modes of being depend upon the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos” (1959, pp. 14-15). Although Eliade introduces himself as a “historian of religions” (1959, p. 15), he does not limit himself to a specific scientific perspective. Throughout the book, he compares religious men of the primitive and traditional societies—*homo religiosus*—that believe they are living in a sacred cosmos to modern nonreligious man. He advocates that the behavior forms of *homo religiosus* “form part of the general behavior of mankind and hence is of concern to philosophical anthropology, to phenomenology, to psychology” (1959, p. 15). For such a comparison, Eliade provides a vast array of examples ranging from primitive societies (Mesopotamians, the Indians, the Chinese, the Kwaiakutl, etc.) to the poetic phenomenon (Homer, Vergil, Dante and Hindu, Chinese, and Mexican poems, etc). Stressing that there are undoubtedly differences in religious experience in the flow of history, he illuminates his concern as “to present the specific dimension of religious experience” and to describe “the modalities of the sacred and the situation of man in a world charged with religious values” (1959, pp. 17-18).

One of the differences between the experience of religious man and that of modern man is based on the different ways they conceptualize space: space is nonhomogeneous for religious man whereas space is homogeneous and neutral for profane experience (1959, pp. 20-22). What Eliade means by nonhomogeneous is a space with interruptions and breaks in which some parts “are qualitatively different from others” (1959, p. 20). Eliade provides an example from Exodus in which the Lord says to Moses “put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place wheron thou standest is holy ground” (1959, p. 20) that unfolds and stresses the difference between holy and unholy ground. In Eliade’s words, for religious

man, there is sacred space and a formless expanse surrounding it (1959, p. 20). The nonhomogeneity of space in primordial experience is seen in the breaks that are established by the revelation of a center:

When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center. (1959, p. 21)

As opposed to the religious man, space is homogeneous and centerless for the nonreligious man who does not believe in a sacralized cosmos. However, Eliade asserts that, even in the minds of the nonreligious man, there are “traces of a religious valorization of the world” (1959, p. 23). Some values in the experience of the non-religious man are similar to the nonhomogenous conceptualization of the religious man. The nonreligious man has “‘holy places’ of his private universe” or “‘privileged places, qualitatively different from all others—a man’s birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth” (1959, p. 24). Such values in contemporary minds are relics of the nonhomogeneous scheme of space in the minds of religious men who believe in living in a sacralized cosmos.

Saying that the nonhomogenous space in the experience of a religious man is evident in any religion, Eliade provides the example of a church and its door and threshold that indicate boundaries separating the sacred interior from the exterior. Calling them *images of opening*, Eliade comments on doors, temples, and ladders (like the one in Jacob’s dream) as images enabling communication with god(s) and angels and thereby a possibility of transcendence (1959, p. 26).

Eliade also analyzes traditional societies that see their inhabited lands as a “cosmos” and the unknown outside land as “chaos”. From this perspective, the occupation of a land or settling in a land is a symbolic transformation of a once chaotic land into a cosmos “through a ritual repetition of the cosmogeny” (1959, p. 31). For habitation, the men of traditional societies have “a paradigmatic model—the creation of the universe by the gods” and they are imitating or repeating “a primordial act, the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation” (1959, p. 31). Thus, for Eliade, the consecration and

cosmicization are intertwined since the consecration of a place or cosmicizing a place is a repetition of the cosmogeny.

Explaining this equivalency between consecration and cosmicization, Eliade uses another term—*axis mundi*—the image of a universal pillar at the center of the universe enabling communication with divine forces. One striking example of *axis mundi* is the sacred pole the Achilpa—an Arunta tribe among the nomadic Australians— carries everywhere they go and see as ensuring communication with the divine world. This sacred pole offers a prototype of a cosmological image in which a cosmic pillar supports heaven and reaches the world of gods evident in various social formations such as the Celts and Germans until their conversion to Christianity, ancient India, the Canary Islanders, the Kwakiutl, the Nad'a of Flores Islands. (1959, pp. 32-36).

Eliade summarizes the cosmological patterns and images that make up a “system of the world” in traditional societies as follows:

- (a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space;
- (b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld) ;
- (c) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*: pillar (cf. the *universalis columna*) , ladder (cf. Jacob’s ladder), mountain, tree, vine, etc. ;
- (d) around this cosmic axis lies the world (= our world), hence the axis is located “in the middle,” at the “navel of the earth”; it is the Center of the World. (1959, p. 37)

Eliade offers many examples to illuminate how this traditional “system of the world” lies at the core of various myths, rites, and beliefs. The cosmic mountains, holy sites, sanctuaries, and temples are the prominent symbols in the “system of the world” (1959, pp. 38-42). Those sites, parallel to the traditional “system of the world”, reveal micro-macro relations since they are what Eliade calls *imago mundi*—the image of the world at a micro-scale: “An entire country (e.g., Palestine), a city (Jerusalem), a sanctuary (the Temple in Jerusalem), all equally well present an *imago mundi*” (1959, p. 42). *Imago mundi* concept exemplifies how certain spaces of human world as a microcosm of the sacred divine world may attain a sacred quality by cosmic reflections. Religious man can give the value of an *imago mundi* to their dwelling places (villages or houses), ritually

cosmicizing them in two methods:

- (a) assimilating it to the cosmos by the projection of the four horizons from a central point (in the case of a village) or by the symbolic installation of the axis mundi (in the case of a house); (b) repeating, through a ritual of construction, the paradigmatic acts of the gods by virtue of which the world came to birth from the body of a marine dragon or of a primordial giant. (1959, p. 52)

Parallel to Eliade's often repeated argument that the images of the religious primitive men who believe in a sacralized cosmos persist in some way in the lives of modern man in urban, industrialized societies, such cosmicizing attempts are evident, especially in later religious architecture. Eliade states that "Religious man's profound nostalgia is to inhabit a 'divine world,' is his desire that his house shall be like the house of the gods, as it was later represented in temples and sanctuaries" (1959, p. 65). Thus, the way the primitive man consecrates space (house, village) lingers inside the later temples and sanctuaries or, in other words, the "system of the world" lives on in the religious architecture.

Eliade, as a historian of religion, phenomenologist, and mythologist, offers a compelling insight into the dichotomy between sacred and profane in his examination of the nature of religion. Using terms such as *hierophany*, *images of opening*, *axis mundi*, *imago mundi*, Eliade extends the schemas in which the sacred is revealed. Noting that there are changes in the flow of history and civilization from the archaic primitive time to urban industrial times, Eliade hints at the differences in the experience of humanity and stresses the unity explaining the "system of the world" since there are vestiges of the schema in the minds of the modern men from those of traditional societies. From this perspective, Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* deciphers the universal symbolism in relation to the sacred and stands as an exceptional study that offers insight for those studies on what Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt (1995) call "mythological approach of religion" that tends to dive into the universal mythic archetypes. The second part of the study, which includes film analyses, proves that the vestiges in the minds of modern man are even more powerful and profound than Eliade thinks.

2. The Sacred Tree as a Religious Symbol from an Eliadean Perspective

The sacred trees such as Yggdrasil, Aswatha, Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, etc. in different myths and religions, that have been examined in various fields such as anthropology, religion, psychology, folklore, and history, have been richly investigated from the perspective of their meanings as a part of religious symbolism. There are, “two main scholarly approaches to the study of symbols” within the study of religion; one of them “restricts the examination of the symbol to the culture within which it is found” while the other “admits comparative material from other cultures and may accept that there is ‘a universal system of symbols’” (Cusack, 2011, pp. 3-4). The first approach that Cusack mentions is the historical approach that concentrates on symbols in a single culture and the second one is the comparative approach that offers a comparative examination of symbols in more than one culture and one of the figures in the comparative approach¹² is Mircea Eliade. Cusack advocates that even though Eliade “is criticised for his promotion of an essentialist definition of religion as a *sui generis* category, and for his ahistorical and quasi-theological theoretical formulations”,¹³ an investigation into the sacred tree should consider Eliade’s theories (2011, p. 7)¹⁴.

Before concentrating on Eliade’s analysis of the sacred tree as a religious symbol, it would be wise to explain how Eliade explains the content and function of religious symbolism. In *Myths, Rites, Symbols*, Eliade calls man “*homo symbolicus*” and asserts that all activities of man imply symbolism and “every religious fact has necessarily a symbolic character” (1976, p. 346). According to Eliade, “the World ‘speaks’ in symbols, ‘reveals’ itself through them” and “a symbol is not a replica of objective reality. It *reveals* something deeper and more fundamental” (1976, p. 347). One of the characteristics of religious symbolism is its multivalency: “its capacity to express simultaneously several meanings the unity between which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience”

12 For more information on the comparative approach in religious symbolism see Hunt (2016), (2018), and Reno (1977).

13 For more information on how Eliade is criticized, see Allen (1988), Brown (1981), Dudley III (1976), (1977), and Vanhaelemeersch (2007).

14 Cusack introduces her study *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* as “‘limited historical approach’ rather than “the broad comparative approach” (4) since it concentrates on specific historical contexts (ancient and medieval manifestations) using Eliadean terms such as *axis mundi* and *imago mundi*.

(1976, p. 348). Religious symbolism has an important function in relation to “its capacity for expressing paradoxical situations or certain patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way” (1976, p. 349). Furthermore, Eliade stresses that religious symbolism does not only “reveal a pattern of reality or a dimension of existence, it brings at the same time a *meaning to human existence*” (1976, p. 350):

A religious symbol translates a human situation into cosmological terms, and vice versa, to be more precise, it reveals the unity between human existence and the structure of the Cosmos. Man does not feel himself “isolated” in the Cosmos, he is open to a World which, thanks to the symbol, becomes “familiar”. On the other hand the cosmological significances of a symbolism allow him to escape from a subjective situation and recognize the objectivity of his personal experiences. (1976, pp. 350-351).

Thus, Eliade stresses the role of religious symbolism explaining how it offers meaning and enables an objective dimension to a human’s subjective situation. Religious symbolism is rich in cosmological signification and use of religious symbolism is a part of the process in which humans situate themselves in the cosmos and engage in a meaning-making process in which their subjective situations become objective. To elucidate “the capacity of symbols to reveal an inner pattern of the World” Eliade extends on the Cosmic Tree and its symbolic content:

The Tree reveals the World as a living totality, periodically regenerating itself and thanks to this regeneration, continually fertile, rich and inexhaustible. Here, too, it is not a question of considered knowledge, but an immediate comprehension of the “cipher” of the World. The World “speaks” through the Medium of the Cosmic Tree and its “word” is directly understood. (1976, p. 347).

How the tree as a symbol stands for regeneration is also present in Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), especially in his chapter “Vegetation: Rites and Symbols of Regeneration” in which he studies sacred trees, symbols, myths, and rites of plant life. While concentrating on the religious function and meaning of trees, plants, and vegetal symbols Eliade attempts to “find a coherent pattern beneath the apparent polymorphousness of tree symbolism” (1958, p. 266). To avoid confusion, Eliade works on a classification for vegetation cults

that includes:

- (a) the pattern of stone-tree-altar, which constitutes an effective microcosm in the most ancient stages of religious life (Australia; China; Indochina and India; Phoenicia and the Aegean);
- (b) the tree as image of the cosmos (India; Mesopotamia; etc.);
- (c) the tree as a cosmic theophany (Mesopotamia; India; the Aegean);
- (d) the tree as symbol of life, of inexhaustible fertility, of absolute reality; as related to the Great Goddess or the symbolism of water (Yakşa. for instance); as identified with the fount of immortality (“The Tree of Life”), etc.;
- (e) the tree as centre of the world and support of the universe (among the Altaics, Scandinavians, etc.);
- (f) mystical bonds between trees and men (trees giving birth to men; the tree as the repository of the souls of man’s ancestors; the marriage of trees; the presence of trees in initiation ceremonies, etc.);
- (g) the tree as symbol of the resurrection of vegetation, of spring and of the “rebirth” of the year (the “May” procession for instance, etc.). (1958, pp. 266-267)

Following this classification, before delving into details, Eliade clarifies the tree symbolism: “the tree represents-whether ritually and concretely, or in mythology and cosmology, or simply symbolically-the living cosmos, endlessly renewing itself” (1958, p. 267). Eliade provides a very detailed analysis of trees in different myths, religions, or iconographies for each group in the above classification. In this classification, only those trees that can be linked to ideas such as death, life, regeneration, and rebirth are shortly introduced in this part since this study concentrates on how the tree as a symbol helps people to make sense of death.

Tree as Images of Cosmos

The tree may become sacred as it becomes an *imago mundi*, a symbol of the universe or cosmos, and a sacred place where the microcosm reflects the whole (Eliade, 1958, p. 271). An exceptional example of the cosmic tree is the Aswatha tree from Indian tradition. The Aswatha tree is a giant inverted tree that represents the whole cosmos. The Upanisads illustrate the Universe as “an inverted tree, burying its roots in the sky and spreading its branches over the whole earth” (1958, p. 273). The image of the inverted tree is also seen in the Tree of Life in Hebraic esoteric teaching, the Tree of Happiness in Islamic tradition, and in the lines of poets Dante and Federigo Frezzi and many folklores and tribes (1958, p. 275).

In addition to the Aswatha tree, Eliade refers to Yggdrasil, calling it “a Cosmic Tree *par excellence*” (1958, p. 276). The roots of Yggdrasil go to the earth. Near it, there is the fountain of Mimir “where Odhin left one eye as a pledge” and the fountain of Urd where gods assemble and the waters in this fountain are used to revive the youth of the tree. There are creatures living on Yggdrasil: there is a goat, an eagle, a stag, a squirrel in its branches, and a viper at its roots. There is a cosmological battle between the eagle and the viper every day and this battle is to bring an apocalyptic conflagration and Yggdrasil is to survive this end-time cataclysm (1958, pp. 276-277).

Various myths and religions offer tree depictions as *imago mundi* in which the tree stands as a symbol of the whole universe. Aswatha and Yggdrasil are among the popular well-known images of the cosmos whose symbolism survives in the way they appear as inspirations in many literary and visual contemporary narratives.

Tree as A Cosmic Theophany

Eliade says “A divinity manifested in a tree is a motif that runs through all Near-Eastern plastic art; it can also be found in the whole Indo-Mesopotamo-Egypto-Aegean area” (1958, p. 278). Such a tree representation is mostly linked to some fertility divinity or to the motif of the Tree of Life in which the tree appears as a source of regeneration or immortality (1958, pp. 278-279). Eliade also notes the divine figures represented in the form of trees such as “Attis and the fir tree,

Osiris and the cedar” and plant epiphanies such as “the oracular oak tree of Zeus at Dodona, the laurel of Apollo at Delphi, the wild olive tree of Heracles at Olympia” (1958, p. 279). Thus, in different myths and religions, the tree may appear as a theophany standing for a divinity. Despite the variety of tree symbolism in different eras and topographies, the semantic interconnection between trees and fertility or regeneration stands as a monument for many cultures.

Tree as Symbol of Life and as the Center of the World

One of the common patterns in archaic iconography and mythology is the great goddess-tree pattern that indicates “an inexhaustible source of cosmic fertility” (1958, p. 280). The goddess-tree motif is sometimes “completed with the presence of heraldic animals” and sometimes with images of water such as *somas* (Indo-Iranian miraculous plant) pictured near a stream or waters running near the trees mentioned in Ezekiel and the river that runs near the Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (1958, pp. 281-282).

Eliade clarifies the meaning of goddess-tree associations as follows:

They mean that here is a “centre of the world”, that here is the source of life, youth and immortality. The trees signify the universe in endless regeneration; but at the heart of the universe, there is always a tree—the tree of eternal life or of knowledge. The Great Goddess personifies the inexhaustible source of creation, the ultimate basis of all reality. She is simply the expression, in myth, of this primeval intuition that sacredness, life and immortality are situated in a “centre”. (1958, p. 286)

Those mythical trees that signify regeneration, life, and immortality are hierophanies that attain sacred value for also being situated at centers in a nonhomogeneous space (as briefly mentioned in the previous part). In each myth or legend that relates to the Tree of Life, the tree, as an *axis mundi*, stands at the center connecting earth, heaven, and hell. All those trees— the highest tree at the navel of the earth in Altaic cosmology, the cosmic tree with seven levels that the Vayugan Ostiak shaman climbs up in a mystical voyage, Yggdrasil as *univarsalis columna* in Scandinavian mythology, the tree that unites Nine Springs with the Nine Heavens in Chinese mythology, Tree of Life in Indian mythology — are

situated at the center and support the “axis of the universe” (1958, pp. 298-300).

Moreover, Eliade reminds the link between the Tree of Life (that “is the prototype of all miraculous plants that bring the dead to life, heal the sick, restore youth, and so on”) and the cross: the cross had such powers because it was made up of wood from the tree of life in Christian iconography (1958, pp. 292-294). Such a comment reveals how the cross was linked with the Tree of Life and its regenerative powers.

Trees and Men

Eliade also explains a common pattern in the depictions of the trees in Judeo-Christian tradition and earlier mythical/religious forms: a hero is trying to find the tree to gain immortality and it is not an easy errand because not only the tree is hard to find but also the tree is guarded mostly by a serpent, monster, or dragon (1958, p. 288). Such narratives are stories of initiation in which the man becomes a hero in his fight with the monster/guardian. Eliade examines Adam, Gilgamesh (Babylonian hero), and Yima (the first man in Iranian tradition) their heroic tasks (whether they fail or not), and their encounters with monsters, serpents, dragons, or guardians within this framework (1958, pp. 287-291).

Eliade provides the analysis of many other sacred trees. Plant epiphanies are abundant and various but there is a coherent pattern that Eliade signals: “vegetation is the manifestation of living reality, of the life that renews itself periodically” (1958, p. 324). Vegetation becomes a hierophany:

And so we are back at the idea of vegetation becoming a hierophany—that is, embodying and displaying the sacred—in so far as it signifies something other than itself. No tree or plant is ever sacred simply as a tree or plant; they become so because they share in a transcendent reality, they become so because they signify that transcendent reality. By being consecrated, the individual, “profane” plant species is transubstantiated; in the dialectic of the sacred a part (a tree, a plant) has the value of the whole (the cosmos, life) a profane thing becomes a hierophany. Yggdrasil was the symbol of the Universe, but to the Germans of old any oak tree could become sacred if it partook of this archetypal condition, if it

“repeated” Yggdrasil. Similarly, to the Altai peoples any birch tree might be consecrated and so become the Tree of the World, and by mounting it ritually the shaman would in reality be climbing beyond the heavens. (1958, p. 324)

This is how any tree becomes sacred; the trees become hierophanies by sharing and signifying the transcendent reality.

All tree depictions in American films that are analyzed in the second part are hierophanies because they signify a transcendent reality. In those films, the trees, as hierophanies, appear as religious symbols with a significant function of making sense of anomic situations. The next part concentrates on how the idea of sacred and a belief in a sacred canopy function, offering psychological healing for grieving people facing anomic situations.

3. The Sacred Tree in “The Sacred Canopy”: P. Berger on Legitimizing Anomy

Having clarified how Eliade underlines the function of religious symbolism and the symbolic associations of sacred trees, to elaborate on such a function, one should also think about how the idea of living in a sacred cosmos enabled by the institution of religion maintains meaning for the people in a society. In addition to Eliade, another significant contribution to the studies on the sacred is provided by Peter Berger, a prominent and prolific figure in sociology, mostly known for his contributions to the sociology of knowledge and religion. In *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger explores the role of religion in building a sacred reality for society.

Berger examines society dialectically in which society is the product of man and man is the product of society (1967, p. 3). This dialectical process has three moments or steps: externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger 1967, pp. 4). Externalization, which is “the outpouring of human being into the world” is the collective world-building activity of man (Berger, 1967, pp. 3-4). In this phenomenon of externalization, external products may be both material and non-material such as tools, utensils, languages, values, and institutions (Berger, 1967, pp. 7-8). In the moment of objectivation, these products confront man “as a facticity outside of himself” and “the humanly produced world becomes

something ‘out there’” (Berger, 1967, pp. 8-9). During the internalization process, these structures of the objective world are transformed into the structures of subjective consciousness (Berger, 1967, p. 4). Berger summarizes these three moments: “It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivization that society becomes a reality *sui generis*. It is through internalization that man is a product of society” (1967, p. 4).

In this dialectical process, an individual first learns the objectivated meanings but then internalizes them, and “he becomes not only one who possesses these meanings, but one who represents and expresses them” (Berger, 1967, p. 15). Berger also explains the significance of objective/subjective symmetry: “The success of socialization depends upon the establishment of symmetry between the objective world of society and the subjective world of the individual” (1967, p. 15). According to Berger, success in socialization varies and depends on the degree of objective/subjective symmetry: “High successful socialization establishes a high degree of objective/subjective symmetry, while failures of socialization lead to various degrees of asymmetry” (1967, p. 15). Furthermore, since “man’s world-building activity is always a collective enterprise,” the success of socialization that is “an ongoing process through the lifetime of the individual” also depends on the conversation between the individual and his significant others (1967, p. 16):

The world is built up in the consciousness of the individual by conversation with significant others (such as parents, teachers, “peers”) . . . If such conversation is disrupted (the spouse dies, the friends disappear, or one comes to leave one’s original social milieu), the world begins to totter, to lose its subjective plausibility. In other words, the subjective reality of the world hangs on the thin thread of conversation. (1967, pp. 16-17)

Thus, conversation with significant others plays a significant role in the socialization of an individual and in maintaining order.

The world-building enterprise which consists of three moments is indeed the human craving for the construction of order, which Berger refers to as “nomos” (1967, p. 19). Nomos means “meaningful order” and “to say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or nomizing, activity” (1967, p. 19). In the triadic socialization process, people internalize the objective nomos, which is the key to an ordered and meaningful life (Berger,

1967, p. 21). The nomic, ordered, and meaningful structure of the world may be threatened by a marginal situation for an individual or a society. Berger calls this threat an “anomy”. An anomy or a marginal situation may be a phenomenon of individual experiences such as the death of oneself or death of a significant other, divorce and physical separation (1967, pp. 21-22) or a phenomenon of collective experiences such as natural catastrophe, war, and social upheaval (1967, p. 44). Nomos is indeed “a shield against terror” (1967, p. 22) since these anomies can transform order into disorder and meaningfulness into meaninglessness. Berger distinguishes death as “the marginal situation *par excellence*”:

Witnessing the death of others (notably, of course, of significant others) and anticipating his own death, the individual is strongly propelled to question the *ad hoc* cognitive and normative operating procedures of his “normal” life in society. Death presents society with a formidable problem not only because of its obvious threat to the continuity of human relationships, but because it threatens the basic assumptions of order on which society rests. (Berger 1967, p. 23)

Society needs legitimating agencies that would restore faith in the ordered nomos to compensate for anomic situations such as death. According to Berger, religion is by far the most significant institution of legitimation since it is “cosmization in a sacred mode” (1967, p. 25). The institution of religion not only reveals through the idea of sacred that the mysterious and awesome power is manifest in certain objects, animals, men, etc. but also frames a schema in which the cosmos both transcends and includes man (1967, pp. 25-26). In Berger’s words, “The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order” (1967, p. 26). In a sense, Berger examines the opposition between nomos and anomy in line with the opposition between cosmos and chaos, which “is frequently expressed in cosmogenic myths”:

The sacred cosmos, which transcends and includes man in its ordering of reality, thus provides man’s ultimate shield against the terror of anomy. To be in a “right” relationship with the sacred cosmos is to be protected against the nightmare threats of chaos. To fall out of such a “right” relationship is to be abandoned on the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness. (Berger 1967, pp. 26-27)

The institution that maintains humans “to be in the right relationship with

sacred cosmos” is the religion that legitimates even anomic situations thereby justifying social order. There are many ways for religious legitimization. One of them, “probably the most ancient one” “typical of primitive and archaic societies” is “the conception of the relationship between society and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm”; the idea that includes “everything ‘here below’ has its analogue ‘up above’” (1967, p. 34). This microcosm/ macrocosm scheme is either transformed or broken as part of the secularization process; still, “religion continued for many centuries to be the central legitimating agency” (1967, p. 35).

The legitimating power of religion is important in its capacity for “the integration into a comprehensive nomos of precisely those marginal situations in which the everyday life is put in question” (1967, p. 42). The role of religion in legitimation is especially significant in the most marginal situation—death: “legitimations of the reality of the social world *in the face of death* are decisive requirements in any society” (1967, p. 44). Religion provides such legitimations “in terms of an all-encompassing sacred reality” giving an individual “the ‘knowledge’ that even these events or experiences have a place within a universe that makes sense” (1967, p. 44). Berger states that “the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it” (1967, p. 51).

Beger also gives examples of how religion provides solutions for the problem of theodicy. There are various types of theodicy with varying degrees of rationality all of which attempt to answer the question if God is all-powerful and all good, why is there suffering or evil in the world? Berger outlines, “every nomos entails a transcendence of individuality and thus, *ipso facto*, implies a theodicy” (1967, p. 54). “The nomos locates the individual’s life in an all-embracing fabric of meanings, that by its very nature, transcends that life. The individual who adequately internalizes these meanings at the same time transcends himself” (1967, p. 54). Through “the sheltering canopy of the nomos” the individual transcends his own individuality, thereby “the pain becomes more tolerable, the terror less overwhelming” (1967, p. 55). Another solution for the problem of theodicy is what Berger calls the masochistic attitude that is believing in the formula of “I am nothing—He is everything” that “transforms the self into nothingness, the other into absolute reality” (1967, p. 56). In addition, in another

type, an individual's transcendence is maintained by "complete identification with the collectivity" and the anomic situations becomes "only episodes in the continuing history of the collectivity with which the individual is identified" (1967, p. 60). Other examples Berger offers for the religious attempts to legitimate anomic situations are; any idea in which the microcosm/macrocosm scheme prevails, mysticism (anomic situation insignificant trivia when "compared with the overwhelming reality of the mystical experience of union" [1967, p. 63]), the *karma-samsara* complex (every conceivable anomy is integrated within a thoroughly rational, all-embracing interpretation of the universe [1967, p. 65]), Buddhism, the messianic – millenarian complex (anomy is legitimated through a reference to future nomization in other-worldly terms [1967, pp. 68-70]) and dualism (anomies are a part of the struggle between forces of good and evil [1967, p. 71]), soteriology, etc.

Thus, different religious practices and belief systems offer different schemas to solve the problem of theodicy and enable individuals to make sense of anomic phenomena. Berger concludes:

To repeat, every human order is a community in the face of death. Theodicy represents the attempt to make a pact with death. Whatever the fate of any historical religion, or that of religion as such, we can be certain that the necessity of this attempt will persist as long as men die and have to make sense of the fact. (1967, p. 80)

The films analyzed in the next part by providing visual and literary references to the mythical sacred tree offers also solutions for the problem of theodicy since those films portraying the sacred tree as a part of the sacred canopy present the human need to make sense of the most anomic force—death. The trees in these films are sometimes connotative of numinous and hierophanies in which the sacred becomes manifest, an *axis mundi* signifying a center through which the characters muse about their pain, a theophany in which divinity is represented, or an *imago mundi* through which micro-macro relations are maintained. Building upon the rich tree symbolism in mythical and religious heritage, the trees in these films form a dominant motif repeatedly referring in word and image to the tree as a religious symbol in the meaning-making process of humanity. Using such a symbol of life and regeneration, this motif takes on the essential task of legitimating the anomy of death.

CHAPTER 2

THE SACRED TREE, DEATH, AND REGENERATION IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN FILMS

1. “Death as An Act of Creation”: The Cosmic Tree as Hierophany in *The Fountain* ¹⁵

One of the best films in American cinema that portrays the symbolic sacred tree along with meditations on death and rebirth is undoubtedly Darren Aronofsky’s *The Fountain* (2006). The film presents three interwoven stories with different temporal and spatial settings in a nonlinear narrative style. Despite the differences in settings, the film, starring Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz, is a love story of a couple who are the protagonists in each of the three strands. In one strand, which takes place in fifteenth-century Spain, a conquistador named Tomás Verde attempts to save Queen Isabel of Spain from inquisitorial judgment. The second strand, which is set in contemporary life, presents Izzi, who is on her deathbed due to a brain tumor, and her husband Tommy, who is a neuroscientist desperately searching for a cure to save her. The last strand depicts the space traveler Tom in a bubble floating in space sometimes visited by both Queen Isabel and tumor-stricken Izzi in visions. The tree emerges as the most prevalent image in each story: the conquistador tries to find the Tree of Life to prevent inquisition; the neuroscientist searches for a cure using the bark of a tree as a sample; the space traveler journeys along with a dying tree in his bubble. Aronofsky uses the motif of the sacred tree both visually

¹⁵ An earlier version of this study on the film *The Fountain* was presented at a conference on “The Sacred & The Sublime” in 2016 and later published in the book *Perspectives on the Sublime in American Cultural Studies* in 2018.

and thematically in an impressive way; that is why the studies that vary in their critical approaches to *The Fountain* all include an analysis of the mythical tree as portrayed in the film (Laine, 2015; Hill, 2008; Koehler, 2012; Lord, 2009; Piskorski, 2013; Pisters, 2010). Through a reference to the mythical tree in the Judeo-Christian and Mayan traditions, the film is a dramatic rumination on how we come to terms with death, which is described as an anomic phenomenon by Berger in *The Sacred Canopy*. Focusing on the sacred tree portrayal as a hierophany, this part investigates how *The Fountain* delineates the use of the idea of sacred in making sense of anomic situations such as death, dying, and grief.

Before evaluating this thematic exploration of death in *The Fountain*, it is necessary to explain its multifaceted structure. The film begins with an epigraph which is a reference to the Tree of Life in the book of Genesis: “Therefore, the Lord God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and placed a flaming sword to protect the Tree of Life” (Aronofsky, 2006). The conquistador is led into a Mayan temple where he is challenged by the Mayan priest with a flaming sword (reminiscent of the sword in the book of Genesis) uttering the words “Death is the road to awe” (Aronofsky, 2006). Once the tree of life in the epigraph and the issue of death in the conquistador’s storyline begin to form the thematic concerns of the film, the conquistador’s plotline is followed by the space traveler’s plotline. The scene presenting the conquistador Tomás screaming against the flaming sword is intercut into the scene depicting the space traveler Tom screaming whose meditation in lotus position is interrupted. After uttering “Don’t worry, I won’t let you die” (Aronofsky, 2006) to the dying tree, the space traveler Tom sees Izzi in a vision. Then comes the dialogue, which will be repeated a couple of times later in the movie, in which Tom asks, “What are you doing here” and Izzi replies “Take a walk with me” (Aronofsky, 2006). This dialogue in the space bubble is intercut into a scene in the contemporary strand that illustrates the couple engaging in the same dialogue. The present-day Doctor Tommy rejects his wife’s offer to take a walk in the first snow of winter because he is dedicating himself to finding a cure in his laboratory. This is how the three narrative plotlines are interwoven at the very beginning of the film. The whole movie is indeed a fascinating composite of such intercuts relating the three strands visually and thematically to each other in sometimes smooth sometimes sudden transitions. Laine comments on how the events and situations in different time layers echo and link each other:

Events and situations that are part of one time layer are frequently echoed in one another. The warning sign on Izzie's electrocardiac equipment is first heard by Tomás in the past and then by Tom in the future, before it finally wakes up Tommy inside her hospital room in the present. Snowflakes from the present fall onto the rootstalk of the dying Tree of Life in the future. Tommy's memories from the present become Tom's hallucinations in the future. Tom picks up the ring in the future that Tomás dropped in the past. (Laine, 2015, p. 89)

The hard nonlinear structure is slightly eased by the repetitions and parallelism of sounds, lines, or images linking and interweaving the three plot lines.

Even though *The Fountain* is a combination of three different narrative plots that complement each other, it is possible to realize the anomy of death in each storyline: in the Spanish setting, the anomy is the death of the queen; in the contemporary setting, it is the death of Izzi and in the space setting, it is the death of the tree. However, there is actually only one anomy—Izzi's death because as the film goes on, it becomes apparent that the main plot in the contemporary setting is the frame story. The story that takes place in Spain depicting the conquistador and the queen is the story that takes place in the book titled "The Fountain" which Izzi begins writing before she dies. Izzi writes the first eleven chapters of the book and since she does not have that much time to write the last chapter, she wants Tommy to write the final chapter. In addition, the story that takes place in the space bubble is Tommy's conclusion to Izzi's book. Therefore, the film includes a story within a story structure (or *The Fountain* within *The Fountain* structure). For this reason, the main anomy is Izzi's death but it has two perspectives. The film presents cancer-stricken Izzi's trauma on her deathbed on the one hand and Tommy's traumatic suffering before and after his wife's death on the other. Berger points out that both the death of oneself and that of a significant other may ruin the meaningful order in one's life. "The confrontation with death . . . , probably the most important marginal situation" "radically challenges *all* socially objectivated definitions of reality—of the world, of others, and of self" (Berger, 1967, p. 43). Izzi's cancer, which results in her death, is the anomic force threatening the happiness and order of the couple. The film shows how both Izzi and Tommy overcome the trauma of anomic death. Aronofsky illustrates hierophany, especially the manifestation of the sacred in the form of the tree along with the main characters facing anomic situation depicting Izzi

accepting her death and then Tommy learning to legitimate the pain regarding the death of a significant other.

At the beginning of *The Fountain*, Izzi is evidently going through hard times since she is grappling with her own death. There is a striking change in how Izzi envisions the anomy of death and this change is overtly seen in the symbolic associations of the mythical tree she uses as inspiration for her book titled “The Fountain.” The first eleven chapters of the book are about the Spanish queen who sends a conquistador to find the mythical tree in order to escape the inquisitorial judgment. This mythical tree in the navel of the earth that provides eternal life according to Mayan myths, is also confirmed by the Bible, the queen says. The book Izzi works on, even though set in fifteenth-century Spain, is full of autobiographical elements. Queen Isabel represents Izzi and the inquisitor is certainly a representation of the cancer that is the source of anomy. The conquistador trying to save the queen from inquisitorial judgment is her husband who is using science to save Izzi in the contemporary day. This parallel between the conquistador and the scientist is illuminated with utmost clarity when contemporary-day Izzi calls her husband “my conquistador, always conquering” (Aronofsky, 2006), referring to his hard work at the laboratory. Up until the last chapter of the book, Izzi is inspired by the mythical Tree of Life offering eternity to humankind. The only way for Izzi to overcome her fear of the anomy of death is tied to a scenario in which death is overwhelmed by eternity. However, for her last chapter, she finds different inspirations such as Xibalba and the Mayan creation story. These mythical images help her change her approach to dying and overcome her fear.

In the scene in which she confesses to Tommy that she has lost her sensitivity to hot and cold, she explicitly tells her husband that she is afraid. However, there is a change: her fear leads to strength and achievement of grace. The first eleven chapters of Izzi’s book take place in Spain, but Izzi wants the setting of the last chapter to be Xibalba, the underworld in Mayan mythology. When Tommy comes home, Izzi shows him the nebula wrapped around a dying star in the sky with a telescope and introduces Xibalba as “the place dead souls go to be reborn” (Aronofsky, 2006). She is excited about the idea of representing the underworld with a dying star: “Someday soon [Xibalba] will explode, die and give birth to new stars. How amazing that the Mayan chose a dying star to represent their underworld” (Aronofsky, 2006). This scene is a good example of how technology

and spirituality or science and mythology are juxtaposed in relation to the overall perception of death. Izzi's explanations include both a scientific explanation of a nebula and a mythological conceptualization of a dying star. This scientific and mythological contemplation of a nebula lays the groundwork for her second thoughts about death, but at this point, she is still afraid. Moreover, with the help of this sequence the importance of the tree symbolism is signified as "beyond the time" since it refers to the past and the future at the same time.

A bathroom scene in which Tommy helps Izzi to bathe follows this stargazing scene. Tommy realizes that her cancer has progressed since she loses sensitivity to hot water in the bathtub and wants to call the doctor. Izzi says that she is afraid but that she also feels different inside. This scene is significant because it points out that Izzi's approach to the anomic terror of death is changing but still she is anxious about this anomaly. Moreover, the fact that the couple is engaged in this dialogue in a bathtub in which Izzi cleanses herself with water is meaningful due to the traditional symbolism of water in relation to rebirth and regeneration.

Izzi's change becomes much more obvious in the museum scene in which she keeps learning about Xibalba in Mayan mythology. In the visit to a museum, Izzi's descriptions of the creation myth in an actual Mayan book relate the imagery of Xibalba to that of the mythical tree. Izzi shows Tommy the first human who "sacrificed himself to make the world" and the tree of life that "burst out of his stomach" and "spread and formed the earth" (Aronofsky, 2006). The first father becomes one with the tree: "his soul became the branches rising up from the sky" and "all that remained was first father's head" which was hung in the heavens by his children creating Xibalba (Aronofsky, 2006). While she excitingly recounts the story of the first father in Mayan mythology, Tommy listens but wants to leave the museum, likely eager to go to the hospital. This scene is a replay of the duality of science and spirituality: Tommy tries to use any scientific or technological means to heal his wife while Izzi is interested in spiritual healing, taking comfort in mythological conceptualizations of death and rebirth.

After sharing the information about the first father in Mayan mythology, Izzi asks Tommy what he thinks about the idea of death "as an act of creation" (Aronofsky, 2006). Then in a sudden burst of white light, looking upward Izzi faints due to a seizure. In this scene, according to Hill, Izzi "gains gnosis" and "realizes the ultimate meaning behind the symbol: the inescapable demands of dissolution and their relationship to soul development" (2008, p. 182). She faints, but actually, that

is a moment of awakening or enlightenment that is poignantly indicated in the use of lights. Johnson, who evaluates this scene as Izzi's epiphany, comments, "She steps into a pool of light (which Tommy previously stepped around, symbolizing his continued blindness to truth) and gazes upwards. Aronofsky cuts from Tom's confused expression to a close-up of her eyes widened in a look of awe, her face awash in white light" (2015, p. 113). This pool of light is in the shape of a circle—the shape used in almost every frame, thereby emphasizing its symbolic association with the concept of eternity.¹⁶

When Izzi wakes up in the hospital, she describes the moment of collapse in the museum, as "I wasn't afraid. When I fell, I was full and held" (Aronofsky, 2006). She gives her husband a pen and ink as a present to write the last chapter of her book or to "finish it." She talks about the understanding of death "as an act of creation" with Tommy in a similar tone as the conversation they had in the museum. Izzi reminds Tommy of the Mayan guide named Moses Morales and recounts the information he shares about the death of his father:

He said that if they dug his father's body up, it would be gone. They planted a seed over his grave. The seed became a tree. Moses said his father became a part of that tree. He grew into the wood, into the bloom. And when a sparrow ate the tree's fruit, his father flew with the birds. He said ... death was his father's road to awe. That's what he called it. The road to awe. Now, I've been trying to write the last chapter and I haven't been able to get that out of my head! (Aronofsky, 2006)

16 The repetitive use of certain shapes, one of which is the circle is attention grabbing in the multifaceted structure of the film. Piskorski comments that "The circle, as a motivic shape, reemerges time and again in both storylines, in the form of rings, glass cases, floor tiling, stars, tattoos and the glass orb itself, which is the set for the Space storyline" (2013, p. 82). Also, Piskorski analyzes the scene in which the present day Izzi leaves Tommy's lab: the lights form a shape of the cross on the door while the lights form circles on the floor" (2013, p. 82). Also, Pisters reveals the director's specific choices of dominating shapes in different storylines: ". . . as indicated by Aronofsky, each layer for itself also has a different predominant figure. In sixteenth-century Spain and the Mayan civilizations, the triangle (the three-point star in Mayan cosmology, arches in the Queen's palace) is recurrent and sometimes enfolded in a picture on the wall in Tommy and Izzy's apartment in the twenty-first century. In this layer of time, the most repeated forms are the rectangle and square (computer screens, windows, pictures, doorways, etc.), emphasizing our screen culture. And in the third layer of the future it is the circle, the bulb, and the sphere that are presented in many variations" (2010, p. 248).

According to Moses Morales, his father is not within his human body but is still a part of an awesome cosmos. Death is not an end but only a physical transformation; this idea helps Izzi to overcome her fear, and she wants to use it as an inspiration for the last chapter of her book. The idea of a transcendental regenerating cosmology enables Izzi to face her anomic situation. She accepts the fact that she is close to dying and she wants Tommy to use her presents—ink and a fountain pen¹⁷ to finalize her book with such a conceptualization of death. When Tommy asks why she is talking about Moses Morales, she answers “I’m not afraid anymore, Tommy.” (Aronofsky, 2006). How Izzi gets rid of her fear is ostensibly an outcome of her ruminations on the mythical tree. “Through her exploration of the interaction between European and Mayan images of the archetypal tree, Izzi begins to understand physicality from a different point of view” (Koehler, 2012, p. 7). In addition, the name of the “Mayan” guide as “Moses”, an old Hebraic name, signals a multicultural correlation between the Mayan mythology and Old Testament in the ways they use tree imagery. In other words, the symbolic meaning and the meaning hemisphere of the tree is used in different cultures and practices in human life.

Mores Morales’s narrative is representative of the belief called “transmigration of the soul” which Weber describes as the view suggesting that “the souls of the dead may be incorporated into animals and plants” (1963, p. 140). In this transmigration process, the father’s spirit becomes a part of the seed, tree, and bird and flies to awe. The images of the mythical trees as hierophanies provide Izzi the means to conceptualize death not as an ending but as a “creation” and “a road to awe” (Aronofsky, 2006). Using Berger’s terminology, the mythical tree becomes the religious emblem that helps her to legitimate her death. Pondering the mythical tree, she comes to believe in the sacred order of the universe in which death is only a transition through which new life sprouts.

Even though Izzi accepts and even embraces death before she dies, it is not that easy for Tommy to accept the loss of his wife. The hardship of accepting anomaly for Tommy is obvious at Izzi’s funeral. Tommy’s mentor and boss Dr. Lillian gives an impressive eulogy at Izzi’s funeral, but Tommy is pissed at such a view:

17 “The fountain pen as a gift, a reference to the title ‘The Fountain’, is something Izzi leaves for Tommy to complete” (The Haptic Image, 2012). The fountain pen as a present is a good choice both for its reference to the title that further highlights water-tree symbolism and for expressing how writing is a good practice for people facing anomic situations.

We struggle all our lives to become whole, complete enough when we die, to achieve a measure of grace. Few of us ever do. Most of us end up going out the way we came in kicking and screaming. But somehow Izzi, young as she was, she achieved that grace. In her last days, she became whole (Aronofsky, 2006).

Even such moving ideas on achieving grace make Tommy angry; he leaves the funeral exclaiming that “death is a disease just like any other and there’s a cure and I will find it” (Aronofsky, 2006). Tommy rushes to the laboratory working to achieve the goal to stop aging and dying. His reaction to the concept of death is strikingly different from Izzi’s welcoming approach. In contrast to Izzi who seeks comfort in pondering on the mythical tree, which symbolizes transcendence and immanence, Tommy as a scientist works on a tree using its samples to find a death cure.

As a reminder of the first shot of the film which is a reference to Adam and Eve and their banishment from Eden, Laine considers Tommy as “a modern-day Adam who suffers but refuses to accept this human condition, and feels compelled to find the Tree of Life—that is to ‘play God’ in order to return to the Garden of Eden” (2015, p. 74). Moreover, there is an implicit meaning which reminds the audience about the tree symbol, since the banishment from Eden is interconnected to the Tree of Knowledge. Besides, Laine comments, “His surname, ‘Creo’, which means ‘I believe’ in Spanish, may be seen as a direct reference to the duality of Creator/creation” (2015, p. 74). Like Izzi, Tommy goes through a change: Tommy’s denial of death slowly fades in the process he finalizes Izzi’s book that becomes evident in the space plotline. Tommy’s transformation is indeed a change in what he believes: interpreting death as only a “disease,” the modern-day Tommy believes in the power of science; writing the last chapter, Tom will learn to believe in accepting the grand design. Grasping the arguments of harsh enlightenment norms Tommy initially refuses the myths and beliefs at the very beginning but accepts the undeniable fate at the end.

In the space plotline, Tom becomes a space traveler floating in a bubble on his route to the nebula, Xibalba. Although the bald monk-like space traveler who appears to be performing tai chi or meditating seems to be in peaceful harmony with the universe, he does not know how to deal with the pain or how to “finish” the book. In his bubble, he is constantly tormented by visions of Izzi or her voice asking him to “finish it,” to which he replies “I don’t know how” (Aronofsky,

2006). The space traveler traveling with the dying tree together with a vision of Izzi in his bubble is a visual used as the film's poster (Figure 1).

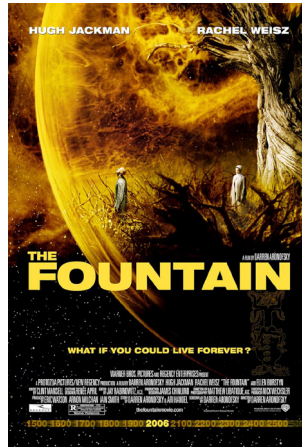


Figure 1. Poster for the Film *The Fountain*. Warner Bros, 2006. Retrieved from <https://www.warnerbros.com/movies/fountain>

Towards the end of the film, Tom figures out the way to finish it is to die and he utters, “I am going to die. Together we will live forever” (Aronofsky, 2006). He climbs the tree (Figure 2), leaves his space bubble, and begins to float in the lotus position to sacrifice himself by getting closer to Xibalba. The lotus position of the character is meaningful since lotus is also a cosmic image like the tree with roots going below and the flower blooming above.¹⁸ The ascending movement of the space traveler is also significant for signaling the character’s initiation through a grasp of transcendence and the experience of hierophany. As Eliade states “The transcending of the human condition “by entering a sacred place (a temple or an altar), by some ritual consecration, or by dying, is expressed concretely as a ‘passage’, a ‘rising’, an ‘ascension”” (1958, p. 102). This scene impressively explicates the transcending experience of the ascending character. Also, in a part on the homology house-body-cosmos, Eliade referring to Arhat breaking the roof of the house or Buddha breaking the cosmic egg explains how flight “signifies access to a superhuman mode of being” and its relation to the idea of transcendence (1959, p. 174). The space traveler’s ascent by the

¹⁸ Eliade in the part “Water Cosmogonies” in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* mentions that the lotus appears as cosmic images in different myths.

mythical tree, breaking free from his space shell is indicative of the homology that maintains transcendence.



Figure 2. Space Traveler's Ascent. Screenshot from *The Fountain* (Aronofsky, 2006)

At this point, the plotline of Tom the space traveler intercuts with Tomás the conquistador who is confronted by the priest in the Mayan Temple. Thus, the ascending space traveler's initiation journey goes on and intercut into Tomás who is about to enter a guarded sacred space. As also a reference to the flaming sword guarding the Tree of Life in the bible, as used in the very beginning of the film, the guarded sacred tree is a pattern also indicated by Eliade. From this perspective, Tomas is like Adam, Gilgamesh, or Yima all of whom are, in Eliade's analysis, encountering the guardians of the sacred tree in their heroic tasks (1958, pp. 278-291). The priest who is about to kill the conquistador to protect the tree in the temple sees the vision of Tom the space traveler. This scene is a repetition of a scene from the beginning in which the conquistador and the priest confront each other, as mentioned before. This time the Mayan priest understands that the conquistador and the space traveler are the same man: the first father who sacrificed himself for all. The priest/guardian sacrifices himself uttering, "my blood will feed the earth" (Aronofsky, 2006) revealing that humans are part of a cyclical regenerating power.

Passing the guarded sacred temple, the conquistador reaches the mythical tree. This scene (Figure 3) vividly portrays what Eliade calls the water tree association because once he gets out of the temple, he walks on a pool and then reaches the tree. When he drinks its sap, he sees a vision of the golden light representing Xibalba—Tom the space traveler's destination. Unable to wear the

ring the queen gave him, the conquistador falls to the ground, and grass and flowers grow out of his body (Figure 4). “This scene represents the resurrection in another form of life; the body has been given back to the primordial substance and the hero has been reborn and transformed” (Arias, 2016, np).¹⁹



Figure 3. The Tree of Life.
Screenshot from *The Fountain*
(Aronofsky, 2006)



Figure 4. The Conquistador.
Screenshot from *The Fountain*
(Aronofsky, 2006)

The connection between different plot lines is maintained this time by another intercut showing Tom the space traveler wearing the ring Tomás drops. The moment Tom wears the ring, the golden light Tom is headed to turns into total darkness. After a shot of a very small white circle in the middle of darkness, there comes a stellar explosion. According to Hill,

Like peeling away the layers of an onion, the astronaut begins to accept the reality of total dismemberment; the reality of the road to death that leads to awe. He enters the great Xibalba nebula. All explodes. Even the ancient tree, which had floated beneath him, disintegrates.

¹⁹ Koehler compares the conquistador's approach to the tree with present-day Tommy's and space traveler's approaches: “The conquistador attempts to use the tree as material. His relationship to nature is destructive. As soon as he discovers it, the conquistador stabs the tree and drinks its milk. His action, however, violates the tree in such a way that it ushers in a violent aspect of creation. In spite of his commodification and violence—perhaps partially because of it—new life occurs. He becomes the tree. He becomes the first father of Mayan myth, and a new tree of life grows out of his body. This transformation dissolves the ego-centered consciousness of the conquistador, infusing his body with eternity. Such a psychoactive connection between the conquistador and the tree stands in contrast to the relationship of the present-day Tommy, who is virtually obsessed with the tree bark's ability to heal, and the astronaut, who gently asks permission of the tree before he takes the small amounts of bark that keep him alive as he continues on his quest to save the tree and destroy death.” (2012, p. 9)

Yet all is reborn in marvelous Light. From a great swirl of dark clouds and brilliance, forms emerge in all directions. (2008, pp.183-184).

This transition from darkness to light is connected to the progressive pattern from death to rebirth. The dying sacred tree blossoms and extends into the space indicating the extension of the sacred into the whole cosmos (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Healing of the Sick Tree. Screenshot from *The Fountain* (Aronofsky, 2006)

The scenes of cosmic light are not computer-generated but a result of macro photography illustrating organic fluids. “Aronofsky and his team hired Peter Parks, a specialist in macro photography, who brewed chemicals and bacteria to create a fluid dynamics on the film stock, which affected the substances photographed” (Pisters, 2010, p. 249). Hall comments on this use of macro photography: “it is interesting to read the organic images as visual metaphors for a film in which all life is inextricably connected; the reactions in the petri dishes mirror the more massive reactions of the stars and nebulae in space” (2007, p. 28). This use of organic fluids is meaningful from the perspective of all micro- and macro-relations projected in *The Fountain*. The reality of death that devastates the nomos of a couple on earth at a micro-level is followed by images of rebirth composed of stunning chemical reactions of fluids on the whole universe at the macro-level. These micro-macro relations are also indicated in the cinematography of the film:

Throughout the whole film, low and high camera angles (characters

looking up into the celestial starfield, the camera looking down on the scene below) are repeated frequently, emphasizing the infinity of the cosmos, the abstract beauty of the composition of the scenes on earth, and the connection between the two. Microcosmos and macrocosmos are also repeatedly connected purely visually, for instance in the image of a brain cell under a microscope that is very similar to the movements and lights in the sky. I already mentioned the particular arrangements of lightning in the first and second layers of time that match the omnidirectional cosmic light bulbs in the third. (Pisters, 2010, p. 248)

Pisters stresses the high and low camera angles as well as other stylistic choices that provide micro-macro relations. Those relations further maintain the sense of transcendence and the supernova scene captures the theme of transcendence in all its grandeur. Following this scene of a supernova demonstrated through organic fluids, even the sick tree in the space bubble is healed. The space traveler Tom understands that once he accepts death as a natural cycle of life and steps outside the bubble to die in the nebula of Xibalba, life goes on, as represented by the blossoming tree. “It becomes clear, as Aronofsky suggests, that the human refusal to embrace death is causing the death of the mythic tree of life” (Koehler, 2012, p. 10). These scenes in which the bodies of both the conquistador and the space traveler regenerate and turn into a new life are potent images of a sacred cosmos in which even death makes sense. Throughout the film, before Izzi dies we hear Tommy telling Izzi “everything is all right” (Aronofsky, 2006). At the end of the film, as a reminder of Moses Morales’ father’s grave, Tom visits his wife’s grave to bury a seed (Figure 6), bids farewell, and whispers that he has “finished” it and “everything is all right” (Aronofsky, 2006). Tom looking up above to the shining star in the sky follows the scene depicting Tom looking down at the grave. This moment clarifies that like Moses Morales’s father, Izzi becomes a tree and a star, regenerated in the cosmos. For the first time, Tommy means it because he understands a great sacred design in which death is not the final destination but a road. Commenting on “the juxtaposition between desire for immortality and acceptance of morality” Laine underlines “Tommy’s inner struggle, caused by his inability either to find a cure for Izzi’s illness or to accept or acknowledge his loss, until he finally reconciles himself to his fate” (2015, p. 75). Then Tommy’s inner struggle at the end resolves in reconciliation. That is how

“together they will live forever” (Aronofsky, 2006) in the regenerating sacred cosmos, also symbolized by the seed.



Figure 6. The Seed. Screenshot from *The Fountain* (Aronofsky, 2006)

The Fountain illustrates coming to terms with the anomy of death, relating it to the journey motif. The nonlinear structure, which includes three narrative plotlines projecting the same characters at different temporal and spatial settings, emphasizes this similarity between the journey and the process of coping with this anomy. In the contemporary setting, Izzi tries to overcome her fear of death and Tommy tries to find a cure for death before and after his wife's death. This struggle to come to terms with or triumph over death is constantly intercut into other narrative plots in which either a conquistador is journeying into the forest to find the mythical tree that provides eternity or a space traveler is wandering in a space bubble with a sick tree. Indeed, these two narrative plots in Spain and space highlight the Creos' journeys to legitimate the anomy of death. Both Izzi and Tommy understand that death itself is a journey that is “a road to awe,” a line repeated a couple of times in the film (twice by the Mayan priest and once by Izzi recounting Moses Morales's perception of his father's death). This repeated word “awe” recalls Otto's element of “awe” as a part of *mysterium tremendum* in the concept of numinous. Then, Izzi's and Tommy's transformations are clearly enabled by numinous experiences.

Another repeated scene emphasizes the metaphorical connection between the process of legitimating death and the episode of making a journey. As also indicated by Pisters, the scene in which Izzi with her white winter coat and white cap visits Tommy in his laboratory and says “Take a walk with me” is repeated three times (2010, p. 247). Although Izzi attempts to persuade Tommy to walk

with her because it is the first snow of the winter, Tommy rejects this offer not only the first time, as mentioned before but also the second time since he has a lot of work to do at the laboratory. To find a cure for the tumor and save his wife, Tommy frequently experiments on a monkey with his research team. He spends much time in the laboratory and unfortunately neglects his wife on her deathbed. Even Dr. Lillian criticizes Tommy for being obsessed with finding a cure and for leaving Izzi alone. Through the end of the film, just before the space traveler Tom and the conquistador Tomás become the first father, Tom decides to follow Izzi into the snow instead of working at the laboratory. In a way, Tommy learns that he should enjoy the limited time they have together on earth instead of spending time to find a means for eternity. Together they take a walk into the snow and this walk resembles the journey of The Creos, who happen to learn the embrace of death as a natural element of the cosmos—or to speak in Berger’s terminology, to learn being “in a ‘right’ relationship with the sacred cosmos” (Berger, 1967, p. 26).

The Fountain depicts a journey into the realms of death and rebirth, and in this journey, one of the major characters is the mythical tree. From the beginning, the theme associated with the anomy of death is visually connected to the mythical tree. The scenes that show parallels between the human body and the trunk of the tree are among the striking visual elements in Aronofsky’s production.²⁰ “The film sets up a network of images which suggest that the secret lies in a route of connecting fibers between the body and the Tree of Life” (Lord, 2009, p. 166). Especially in the intercutting between the space plotline and the contemporary day plotline, a similarity between Izzi’s body and the trunk of the tree is maintained. For instance, the scene in which the space traveler Tom touches the sick tree with his hand is intercut into the image of Izzi’s body in the bathroom, and in this intercut the visual representations of both Izzi and the tree are identical with the same physical curves.

Furthermore, the hairs on Izzi’s neck and those of the tree visually correspond to each other and are repeated three times, once in each plotline. The hairs on the tree move when the space traveler Tom’s hand moves closer to the tree in a close-up during which Tom utters “Don’t worry, we’re almost there” (Aronofsky, 2006). In the contemporary plotline the scene is repeated, with Tommy saying the same line “Don’t worry, we’re almost there” (Aronofsky, 2006), kisses Izzi on

²⁰ This parallelism brings to mind tree=human=world homology that Cusack mentions in *The Sacred Tree*.

her neck in their bed and Izzi's hairs move in the same manner. In addition, when the conquistador in the fifteenth-century plotline discovers the mythical tree in the Mayan temple and touches the hairs of the tree just like the space traveler, the hairs of that tree move just like the tree in the space bubble. Indeed, both Izzi and the tree image represent the same thing: making sense of death. Tom/Tommy utters, "We are almost there" (Aronofsky, 2006) because each plotline presents the human journey to legitimate the anomy of death.

The tree is the dominating pivotal motif and is not limited to the scenes of the tree the conquistador is trying to find, or of the tree accompanied by the space traveler. The visual of the tree is everywhere, such as "the armband tattoos that circle Tom's arms like growth rings of a tree", (Laine, 2015, pp. 83-4), Izzi's blanket barely seen in the contemporary plotline (madeinatlantis, 2014), golden tree branch pattern on Queen Isabel's gown or the branchlike pattern on the woodcarving of the Creos' bed head. Such visual illustrations underscore the significance of the mythical tree in Aronofsky's contemplation on death, life, and rebirth.

To sum up, *The Fountain* is an impressive film providing insight into how societies can make sense of death, which is described by Peter Berger as one of the anomic powers that may turn cosmos into chaos and order into disorder. Berger thinks that an individual (or a society) needs legitimating means that would restore belief in a sacred cosmic order whenever the nomos is confronted by an anomy. Despite the harshness and chaotic terror of anomy, through these legitimations people cling to the idea that order may be maintained in the nomos and chaotic anomic terror may be kept at bay. Religion is the most powerful institution that helps societies build up the nomos and secure the idea of an ordered and meaningful life. In *The Fountain*, the images of the mythical tree, as derived from both Mayan and Biblical traditions, as hierophanies or religious symbols, become the legitimating agencies through which the leading figures learn to cope with and make sense of the anomy of death. In the end, Izzi and Tommy internalize that "everything is all right" since nomos is established in the sacred cosmos in which death is a "creation" or a "road to awe" (Aronofsky, 2006). Aronofsky says

Of all my movies, to the people that are fans, it's almost like a cult religion, they get tattoos and I'm constantly getting long letters from people saying it helped them come to terms with something. So I

think it works for a much smaller audience because ultimately the film is about coming to terms with your own death... (Kiang, 2012).

Keeping in mind Aronofsky's statements that the film helped people to come to terms with death, *The Fountain* in particular, and cinema, in general, may be regarded as legitimating agencies in which the forces of anomy are averted and fear, agony, and disorder that come with the anomy of death are relieved through representations of the manifestation of the sacred.

2. "You Spoke with me through the Sky, the Trees": Tree as Hierophany, "Cinematography as Theophany" in *The Tree of Life*²¹

This is the very essence of Malick's art: movie technique as revelation, cinematography as theophany. (Sterritt, 2011, p. 57)

Another inspiring film that presents the symbolic role of the sacred tree along with the depictions of the anomic pain of death, like *The Fountain*, is Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. The winner of the 2011 Palme D'or, Malick's film *The Tree of Life* presents Jack O'Brien grieving for his dead brother and revisiting his childhood memories in 1950s American suburbia. These flashbacks project not only Jack's but also all family members' attempts to come to terms with the pain of the death of a loved one. In *The Tree of Life*, the struggle to overcome the traumatic pain of death at the microcosmic level is mixed with snapshots providing a history of the universe at a macrocosmic level in a nonlinear, experimental, and epic structure. Thereby the human trauma on earth extends the temporal and spatial boundaries and is associated with a transcendental and eternal order. The movie which is a fascinating pondering on the human need to make sense of the problem of suffering in a cosmos regulated by transcendent order has instigated academic interest due to its spiritual and philosophical content and cinematographic elements (Alves, 2015; Beever & Cisney 2016;

²¹ An earlier analysis of this film and the film *Miracles from Heaven* (analyzed in the next chapter) titled "The Theodicy of Suffering and the Cosmic Voyages in *The Tree of Life* and *Miracles from Heaven*" was published in *Dokuz Eylül University The Journal of Graduate School of Social Sciences* in 2021.

Blasi, 2020; Cerero, 2019; Coman, 2016; Dermentzopoulos & Vassiliou, 2014; Fisher, 2012; French & Shacklock 2014; Hamner, 2014; Handley, 2014; Hay, 2014; Kilby & Johnson & Prusak, 2014; Mancelos, 2013; Manninen, 2013; Plate, 2012; Savu, 2012; Sinnerbrink, 2012; Sterritt, 2011, Tepaske, 2012). This part, focusing on Malick's juxtaposition of micro-macro relations and the sacred transcendent image of the cosmos that the tree stands for, examines Malick's proposal for solving the anomy of death in a transcendent cosmology.

Malick's pondering on the human need to make sense of anomy is presented with reference to the book of Job that is signaled in the epigraph. Just as *The Fountain's* epigraph refers to the Tree of Life from the book of Genesis, Malick uses the book of Job as an epigraph, indicating the parallelism between the suffering of the major characters in the film and the suffering of biblical Job. In addition to the reference to the book of Job, the film uses cosmological patterns evident in the books of Genesis and Revelation. As Detweiller comments, "A family is invited to move from grief to surrender. And viewers are taken from Genesis to Revelation" (n.d.). At the beginning of the film, the scenes of creation follow the suffering of the O'Briens and the ending of the film presents the O'Briens reunited on a mystical beach. The anomy and the problem of theodicy are depicted in a nonlinear and epic structure throughout the movie with a cosmological, eschatological, and soteriological lens.

The problem of theodicy is most noticeable in the O'Briens' internal monologues in voice-over narration in which the family members seek answers or guidance to cope with the reality of death on earth. After a depiction of how Mrs. O'Brien was notified via a telegram about the death of her son R. L. and of the affliction after the funeral, the film jumps ahead in time presenting Jack who turns out to be a successful architect but still trying to make sense of his pain. We hear Jack in voice-overs "How did you come to me? In what shape? In what disguise?" (Malick, 2011). Lighting a candle on the anniversary of his brother's death, the voice-over goes on "I see my brother true, kind, died when he was 19" (Malick, 2011). He is searching for answers and evidently, he is unable to overcome the pain that comes with that traumatic event. Following Jack's rumination on how his mother bared it, there is a change in voice-over narration from Jack's voice to Mrs. O'Brien's voice. This indicates that Jack is not the only one who has questions unanswered. Then begins Mrs. O'Brien's voice-overs such as "Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you? Who are we to you?"

Answer me” (Malick, 2011). Mrs. O’Brien’s questions directly posed to God pinpoint that amid a personal crisis she needs answers from a transcendental ethical God to give meaning to her suffering and her existence in the cosmos.

These questions in voice-over narration are embedded with a long sequence that shows the creation of the cosmos including the Big Bang, the formation of galaxies, stars, planets, and eventually earth. Then the origins of life on Earth are presented including the first fish with amphibian traits, reptiles, and dinosaurs. Manninen stresses the significance of this sequence as, “Malick’s creation sequence is full of profound beauty and awe, and it helps make one aware of the incredible process that antecedently led to our individual and collective existence” (2013, p. 5). In addition, Hay comments that the juxtaposition of Mrs. O’Brien’s questions in voice-over narrations with the creation of cosmos scenes indicates a cosmological mourning:

In the simultaneous montage that intersperses a sequence of cosmological images with a choral performance of *Lacrimosa*, it is as though the whole of creation mourned with her. Indeed, the natural catastrophe of an erupting volcano symbolizes the destruction of her faith: Dasein and its world share the same nature even in absolute destitution. By pairing footage of natural phenomena in the sea, the earth, and the heavens with recordings of hymnal lamentations, Malick is able to evoke a sense of the dynamic and dreadful sublimity of the cosmos that cannot be exclusively characterized as religious or secular. In the extremity of the mother’s grief as she cries to her soul, her son, the formation of stars in the heavens resembles the precipitation of tears. (2014, pp. 6-7)

From this perspective, the mother’s mourning transforms into a cosmic mourning, indicating a transcendent order.

Alves who emphasizes the parallelism of Malick’s creation sequence and the creation in the book of Genesis provide another interesting comment on the mother’s theodical cries in voice-overs followed by the creation of the cosmos scenes:

Malick’s sequence of creation provides on such an account a frame that also endows the family whose citizenship is of a given place and time – Waco, Texas in the fifties – with universal

significance based on a spiritual kinship that transcends the here and now of their merely material existence. And if the viewer is familiar with the literary account of the creation of the world in *Genesis*,²² he will marvel at the close parallels achieved by Terrence Malick's filmic version of the "darkness over the surface of the deep", "the formless and empty earth", "the spirit of God hovering over the waters"; the "emergence of light", "the separation from the darkness, "the evening" and "the morning" of "the first day". (*Genesis*: 1-5). As image flows into image, so will the film render "the vault between the waters to separate water from water" and its gradual expansion in "the sky"; the gathering of "the water under the sky to one place", and the "dry ground" of "earth" to the other, distinct from "the seas"; the land-produced vegetation, and "the lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night", "two great lights-the greater light to govern the day, the lesser light to govern the night."(*Genesis*: 6-17) Finally, "the water teemed with living creatures and birds [flying] above the earth across the vault of the sky". (*Genesis* 20- 21) (2015, p. 77)

As Alves discloses Malick's reinterpretation of the cosmological creation from the biblical tradition enables the motif of transcendence. The human pain and suffering extend into a transcendent cosmological pattern. The creation of the cosmos scene is also indicative of Eliadean analysis of how the primitive men inhabit or cosmicize a place through a repetition of the divine cosmogony or how the divine act of creation offers a paradigmatic model for human endeavors to cosmicize a chaotic land (Eliade, 1959, p. 31). Death is an anomic force transforming the cosmos of the O'Brien into chaos and in a way Malick's projection of the creation sequence is an offering as a paradigmatic model to serve as an inspiration for finding a way to turn chaos into cosmos.

To understand the connection between the voice-overs and this long sequence of creation, it is necessary to focus on the epigraph projected at the very beginning of the film. This epigraph is a reference to the book of Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Job 38:4,7." (Malick, 2011). In the book of Job, "Job wants God to show up and justify himself, to provide an answer to

the question of why the innocent suffer” (Kilby & Johnson & Prusak, 2014, p. 11). This epigraph is God’s answer to Job.²² The epigraph is also an answer to Jack and his mother who are trying to make sense of death. Also, the epigraph is followed by a mysterious light wavering in a background of darkness which could refer to “the presence of God” (Fisher, 2012, p. 5). The voice-overs are in monologue form but if the voice-overs are examined in relation to this long sequence of creation, the film portrays a dialogue in which this creation story is an answer provided by the Almighty transcendental creator God. Manninen comments on the divine question “where were you” relating it to the concept of *mysterium tremendum*:

Perhaps when God asks Job, “Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth,” He is not sarcastically pulling rank on him. Rather, like Malick does to the audience, He is reminding Job of all the beauty, awe, and, to use Rudolf Otto’s term, *mysterium tremendum* that engulfs his every waking breath. His “where were you” should be interpreted as God prodding Job awake, rather than shaking His finger at him. (2013, p. 13)

In addition to Manninen, Sinnerbrink traces the elements of numinous in *The Tree of Life*. For Sinnerbrink, the cosmological myth “shows how a naturalistic-scientific understanding of the evolution of life in the universe is compatible with a sense of spiritual transcendence, an experience of the numinous” (2012, p. 109). Thus, the epigraph followed by the scenes of cosmological creation provides a divine voice along with aspects of transcendence, numinous, and *mysterium tremendum*.

The epigraph followed by theodical cries in voice-over narration and cosmological creation scene prepares the whole motif of micro-macro relations that Malick portrays throughout the film. “Through careful montage, the film dialectically moves between an imagined biocentric cosmos and one that is anthropocentric – personal, particular, and located in the microcosm of Waco, Texas, in the 1950s” (Handley, 2014, p. 83). In Plate’s words, the film “visually reconcil[es] the microcosmos with the macrocosmos, finding our local lives situated within the grand scheme of things” (2012, p. 2). God’s answer to Job

²² Detweiller comments that the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *J.B* by Archibald MacLeish has inspired the film and the film “focuses not upon the losses of Job but upon the overwhelming answer from God.” (n.d.). I think the film is an inspiring dialogue between the transcendent creator (whose presence is provided by images) and the suffering humans (whose cries are most touchingly heard in voice-overs).

projected onto the epigraph reminds humans that besides their anthropocentric existence on earth at a micro level, there is a biocentric cosmos at the macro level and God transcends over this huge creation. The problem of suffering is justified by presenting a transcendental sublime divinity.

In the later part of the film, there is another prominent moment in which visually the micro-macro relations are intertwined along with the problem of suffering revealed in voice-over narration. Remembering the funeral of a drowning boy in his childhood days, Jack asks in voice-over “Where were you? You let a boy die too. You let anything happen. Why should I be good if you aren’t?” (Malick, 2011). As these voice-overs depict the problem of suffering as a result of death, the camera provides a parallelism between the cloud-like forms in a nebula that follow white cloud-like DDT sprayed by a truck on the streets. “The film delights in visual connections between the macro- and microcosmos: far off gassy clouds of nebulae look like the gassy clouds of DDT sprayed for mosquito control in Waco” (Plate, 2012, p. 6). The visual association between the gasses inside the nebula and the gasses on the streets providing micro-macro relations also can be interpreted as a religious legitimization that Berger considers in primitive societies, the idea that “everything ‘here below’ has its analogue ‘up above’ (Berger, 1967, p. 34). The whole movie is rich in such montages providing micro-macro relations to reinterpret the problem of suffering. As Sterritt remarks, “Malick’s trademark voiceovers come and go over a far-reaching montage of microcosmic and macrocosmic images that eventually jell into a fairly linear, if highly unconventional, narrative” (2011, p. 53). This complex and sometimes hard-to-follow montage of images in a nonlinear style serves as solutions for problems of suffering raised in voice-overs, especially in the ways they poignantly tie micro-macro relations.

The problem of suffering is mostly evident in voice-over narrations; the legitimization of anomy is mainly provided in the lines of the characters. The priest who directly refers to the book of Job offers one of the most striking legitimization. Father Haynes’s sermon in the church includes the theme of suffering in the book of Job:

Job imagined he might build his nest on high – that the integrity of his behavior would protect him against misfortune. And his friends thought, mistakenly, that the Lord could only have punished him because secretly he’d done something wrong.

But, no, misfortune befalls the good as well. We can't protect ourselves against it. We can't protect our children. ..

We vanish as a cloud. We wither as the autumn grass, and like a tree are rooted up.

Is there some fraud in the scheme of the universe? Is there nothing which is deathless? Nothing which does not pass away?...

There is no hiding place in all the world where trouble may not find you. No one knows when sorrow might visit his house, any more than Job did.

The very moment everything was taken away from Job, he knew it was the Lord who'd taken it away. He turned from the passing shows of time. He sought that which is eternal. (Malick, 2011)

In his sermon, Father Haynes touches upon several theodical problems. He tries to solve those problems by referring to the book of Job since it assures that suffering is also part of the transcendent God's creation and humans cannot question it. Max Weber also comments on the book of Job highlighting how it offers insight into the disappearance of the problem of suffering:

As people continued to reflect on the insoluble problem of the imperfections of the world in the light of god's omnipotence, one result was inevitable: the conception of an imaginably great ethical chasm between the transcendental god and the human being continuously enmeshed in the toils of new sin. And this conception inevitably led to the ultimate theoretical conclusion, apparently assumed in the book of Job, that the omnipotent creator God must be envisaged as beyond all the ethical claims of his creatures, his counsels impervious to human comprehension. Another facet of this emerging view was that God's absolute power over his creatures is unlimited, and therefore that the criteria of human justice are utterly inapplicable to his behavior. With the development of this notion, the problem of theodicy simply disappeared altogether (Weber, 1963, pp. 142-143).

Weber examines how the problem of theodicy is solved in the book of Job with the conceptualization of an absolute God with limitless power whose ways cannot be questioned. This idea is evident not only in the priest's sermon but also in Jack's grandmother's consoling speech to Jack's mother after his brother's funeral, which

emerges earlier at the beginning of the film. Grandmother says, “I know the pain will pass with time. Life goes on. Nothing stays the same. Lord gives. Lord takes away. That’s the way he is. He sends flies to the wounds he should heal” (Malick, 2011). Grandmother’s speech illustrates how the theme inherent in the book of Job, which is also emphasized by the priest, is internalized in society: Lord gives. Lord takes. That is it; you cannot question or comprehend his ways.

The problem of theodicy is solved not only through these references to the book of Job but also through its indication of otherworldly salvation at the end of the film. Again in a voice-over, we hear Jack uttering “Brother, Keep us, Guide us to the end of time” (Malick, 2011). This uttering is juxtaposed to the scene presenting a grown Jack in a rocky desert led to a wooden door. “The “door” is actually figured as a doorframe whose symbolic significance as the gate to heaven also resides in the passage that it opens from the natural to the spiritual world” (Savu, 2012, p. 98). Once he passes along the door, from the desert, Jack is led to the ocean, probably the ocean of eternity. According to Hay, his brother and mother accompany Jack “to God’s door” and “These loved ones are both examples of and sources for the gifts of forgiveness, mercy, and grace that carry him towards the experience of redemption at the threshold of faith” (2014, p. 7). On the shore, Jack is reunited with all family members and shares this moment with other community members.

The paradisiac or apocalyptic scenes on the shoreline in which the adult Jack is reunited with his family members should not be regarded as situated in regions beyond everyday life. Rather than standing outside the realm of Jack’s story as its eschatological or teleological culminations, the Resurrection of Souls and the Day of Judgment presented figuratively in these scenes are structures of possibility that subsist in the interstices between the moments of Jack’s existence.” (Hay, 2014, p. 7)

These scenes are symbolic depictions of how Jack learns to cope with pain. Jack and his mother learn to make sense of death in the ocean scenes of salvation. In a ritualistic form with two female figures, Mrs. O’Brien raises her arms and in voice-over says “I give him to you, I give you my son” (Malick, 2011). This scene that references Abraham’s sacrifice shows that she is ready to accept death as an integral part of life.

The doorframe that leads the characters into the scenes of salvation is a

potent “image of opening” that enables communication with an otherworldly realm in Elaidean terminology. Handley asserts, “the images of thresholds, door frames, window frames that emerge in the film suggest this liminal arrival to the possibility of God” (2014, p. 89). The film abundantly uses the door as an image of opening: the camera shots of doors, half-open doors, doorframes, and doorways are repetitive throughout the film. In addition to the doors, there are other images of openings such as windows, thresholds, and ladders. Those images of opening provide liminal experiences for characters in a transcendent cosmos.

Along with the images mentioned in the above paragraph, the images of opening that are most eye-catching and remarkable are the trees. Even though the camera lingers on many trees, the most striking one is the oak tree situated in the O’Brien’s garden (Figure 7). This oak tree can be regarded as both an image of opening and an *axis mundi*. “In numerous sequences, the camera ascends along the body of the family tree, capturing the sun through its branches” (Corrigan, 2015, p. 572). Furthermore, Coman emphasizes the role of the title and “the frequent moments of interaction with a tree outside the home of the family whose story is being told, invoking Genesis 2 and 3 and Revelation 22, where trees provide a guiding symbol of God’s provision of abundant wellbeing in a fully restored creation” (2016, p. 1). The trees portrayed from low-angle shots reaching the skies make the images of opening a dominant motif for the overall idea of transcendence linking here to there. Armstrong commenting on a low-angle shot of trees and sky in *The Barbarian Invasion* notes “Such sylvan imagery sees the mourning film take brief respite from its mission of human distress, suggesting perhaps the ancient consolations of a natural cycle in which death is merely one stage” (2012, p. 189). In a similar tone, the repetitive low-angle shot of trees extending to the sky offers the consolation of a cycle in the cosmos in *The Tree of Life* that can be regarded as a touching mourning film.



Figure 7. The *Axis Mundi* Oak Tree. Screenshot from *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011)



Figure 8. Children Playing on the Tree. Screenshot from *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011)

Also reminiscent of Eliadean analysis of trees that appear as protectors of children (Eliade, 1958, p. 306), trees are illustrated as spaces in which children play joyfully (Figure 8). As Plate states, “Trees are a continual reference within the film’s mise-en-scène; they are filled with life, guarding, watching over, relatively immutable, usually seen from the ground up” (2012, p. 7). Furthermore, in a memory scene, Mr. O’Brien plants a tree in their garden and Mrs. O’Brien says “You will be grown before that tree is tall” (Malick, 2011). It is as if the tree is a part of the family witnessing the family members’ births, growths, and sadly death, connecting their lives on the earth to a transcendent cosmology.

The trees are also powerful images in which the problem of theodicy is negotiated. For instance, in the grandmother’s speech “He sends flies to the wounds he should heal” (Malick, 2011) the camera in a low-angle shot depicts the leafless tree with a ladder reaching to the sky indicating a solution of transcendence to the anomic pain. (Figure 8). Both the tree and the ladder emerge as an image of opening in this visual whose “opening” function is further emphasized by the low-angle shot.



Figure 9. The Tree with Ladder. Screenshot from *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011)

The trees are always indicators of the presence and glory of a transcendent power. One example of that is Mr. O’Brien’s realization of the glory represented in trees, etc. after he faces an anomy (unemployment): he says, “I wanted to be loved because I was great. A big man. But I’m nothing. Look at the glory around us. Trees, and birds. I lived in shame. I dishonored it all and didn’t notice the glory” (Malick, 2011). From this perspective, the trees are reminders of the glory of the transcendent deity.

Another remarkable issue about the depiction of trees in the film is how they are associated with the depiction of water. The film also abundantly offers different water sources such as seas, oceans, waterfalls, baptismal waters, and waters running from the hose or garden hose sprinklers sprinkled in the family's garden. Eliade asserts that since immersion in waters is "equivalent to a dissolution of forms" "the symbolism of the waters implies both death and rebirth" (Eliade, 1959, p. 130). According to Eliade, "In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, "wash away sins"; they are at once purifying and regenerating" (Eliade, 1959, p. 131). In this sense, the imagery of trees and waters have similar functions: to imply death and rebirth. That is why the water tree association makes sense in Malick's film. Hamner comments that ". . . the liquid camerawork juxtaposing trees and water attempts a theological reconciliation of the human characters' restlessness, born of finitude and grief" (2014, p. 29). Furthermore, Corrigan provides an interesting reading for "the coupling of water and tree imagery" relating it to Malick's ascending and descending camera movement:

. . . first, the camera arched just above the precipice of a powerful waterfall that cascades downward, and second, a scene shot from below, panning upward along the limbs of an oak tree as the young boys climb into the sun. With this visual pattern of emanation and return coalescing in the imagery of descending waters and the ascendant tree, Malick provides an initial template of creation for the narrative movement of his film. (2015, p. 561)

The image of a waterfall crosscut into the image of a tree with ascending, descending camera movements reveals hints of death and regeneration and provides micro, and macro ties within the transcendent order.

In addition to the water tree association, Malick provides parallelism with trees and tall buildings. For instance, at the funeral scene, the tree in the church garden parallels the church towers. Both the tree and the tall structures of the church are images of openings connecting here to there helping humans make sense of their suffering. Moreover, in the scenes depicting the present-day Jack in front of his office at a skyscraper, there is a tree. Just like the oak tree in O'Brien's garden, there is also a tree situated in front of the present-day Jack's office at a skyscraper. Corrigan comments on these two trees as follows:

In the first ten minutes of the film, the camera pans up along the

wooden rungs of a ladder tacked into the body of the anagogic oak. In a later section that follows a middle-aged Jack, the tree of life is re-figured as a young oak set among the reflective skyscrapers of Houston. As vertical mirrors reflecting the sky above, these architectural structures not only serve as supplements or substitutions but also serve an express purpose, allowing the audience to visualize Jack's ascending journey in an elevator, as he reaches the "door" or threshold that leads to the pre-emanated substance of creation. (2015, p. 561)

This tree in the urban center is different from the other trees in suburbia or woods in which the children or the suffering human play and stroll around but this tree (Figure 10) provides a parallel to the looming buildings in the background which are the images of opening in the urban center.



Figure 10. The Tree in the Urban Center. Screenshot from *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011)

Hamner comments that the scene that depicts the adult Jack aligned with the tree in the courtyard of his workplace is "resonant with how Adam and Eve are narratively aligned with the Tree of Life in Genesis" (2014, p. 26). The tree in the courtyard like the biblical tree of life is *axis mundi*; however, it is a center that is engulfed with the tall corporate buildings of urban spaces and it is hard for an individual to make sense of his being in the cosmos in this center. Even though the middle-aged Jack is actually trying to make sense of his anomic situation by remembering his past and his family ties, he is a very successful man able to ascend to the top offices at skyscrapers. In addition, the fact that he is an architect makes sense because it is a nomizing business providing humans spaces to live in. Despite his success at work, he is clearly not successful at transforming the

anomic situations of his past into nomos. The trees and the symbolic values they stand for are the only means he can understand ways of nomization by remembering the first forms of divine cosmicization. As Corrigan analyzes “In the climax of the film, Jack finally passes through this doorway, entering into a timeless realm where everything at once pre-exists and is simultaneously reconstituted by the sacred heavenly waters flowing from above” (2015, p. 561). This threshold experience in the paradisiacal ocean helps him to legitimate the anomy.

The scenes in this paradisiacal shoreline are followed by initially a field of sunflowers then images from adult Jack’s present life in front of his office in a skyscraper. These scenes in the urban center, just like the sunflowers, are montages of one image of opening after another. Switching from low-angle to high-angle shots, the camera illustrates the tree in the courtyard, and the skyscrapers as images of opening whose tops reach the glowing sun in the sky. The low-angle shots of the images of openings indicate transcendency and the descending elevator and low-angle and straight-on shots of Jack stand for Jack’s attempt to reorient himself at the cosmos.

After the straight-on close-up of a slightly smiling Jack and the low-angle shot of the skyscrapers that reflect clouds of the sky on their glassy surfaces, the film is finalized with the depiction of the bridge looming over the ocean. The bridge is a motif highlighting how his past is connected to his present and how personal history is connected to the history of the cosmos. According to Corrigan, “Malick strengthens the *axis mundi* with one last image and provides an explicit American frame of context for his visual epic” (2015, p. 578). Malick chooses Verrazano-Narrows Bridge which was once envisioned as a “gate to the New World”; as Corrigan asserts, “the bridge does not require further mythologization . . . its very architectural majesty reinforces the resurgent power of the *axis mundi* as a bridge between worlds, whether those worlds are spiritual or material” (2015, pp. 578-579). Jack can only achieve redemption or salvation once he realizes the macrocosmic transcendent order in his microcosmic life full of suffering. From this perspective, the bridge combines the problem of suffering with its solutions.

The Tree of Life is a stunning film including hints for dealing with grief in its manifestation of major characters who go through transformations in the way they learn to make sense of the anomies. Especially the major character Jack

tries to provide nomos by remembering his relations with his family members and his relation to a transcendent deity. In order to understand his relation to a transcendent creator, he should remember his family ties because as he utters at the beginning of the film “Brother, Mother, it was they who led me to your door” (Malick, 2011). Throughout the film, he asks for guidance from his brother at the end he is guided to the mystical beach by him. Moreover, his relationship with her mother plays a vital role in his search for guidance into a transcendent cosmic order. In a voice-over, Jack following the creation scenes says, “You spoke to me through her; you spoke with me from the sky, the trees. Before I knew I loved you—believed in you” (Malick, 2011). From this perspective, brother and mother are figures of *axis mundi* enabling Jack to nomize himself providing communication with the transcendent power symbolized by images of skies, trees reaching the skies, and all other images of opening that Malick and the cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki provide in the film. All those scenes that depict Jack walking or passing thresholds indicate that he is trying to change and make sense of pain just like Tom and Izzi in *The Fountain*. It is as if Malick and Lubezki speak from the skies and the trees to the audience showing them it is possible to make sense of anomic situations by visualizing the life of a Texas family in juxtaposition with the life of cosmology in which there is regeneration after cataclysmic forces.

This part begins with an epigraph (a bit inspired by the uses of epigraphs in *The Fountain* and *The Tree of Life* that highlights the central arguments of the films) that refers to David Sterritt’s comment on the essence of Malick’s art: “movie technique as revelation, cinematography as theophany” (2011, p. 57). The phrase “cinematography as theophany” is meaningful because the narrative gives bits of hints about Jack who remembers his past and his effort to make sense of his anomic situations in his past. As Jack moves both vertically and horizontally in different spaces to process his pain the camera succeeds in proving a sense of theophany in which the audience is provided with montages of emanating light sources and images of openings such as trees, ladders, doors, windows, etc. through which humans can witness the cosmos as theophany. The images of suns and sunflowers are repetitively used in a symbolic sense that can easily be commented as the sunflower/humans trying to follow the light from the sun/deity. Also, we the audience are trying to understand and follow the light coming from Malick’s repertoire of images in his fluid camera portraying a transcendent cosmos.

Malick's film *The Tree of Life* is a rumination on traumatic human suffering on earth. The film especially focuses on Jack's and his mother's suffering which is most obvious in voice-over narration in which they seek divine guidance. This suffering on earth in O'Brien's family's story is set side by side with the scenes of biocentric cosmic history. Such juxtaposition extends the temporal and spatial boundaries of human suffering on earth and relates it with an eternal transcendental order. Throughout the film, the characters struggle with the problem of theodicy and once they are reminded of the divine order in the eternal macrocosm, they come to understand that death is an integral part of life. This awareness is their salvation, their way of making sense of affliction. The film offers legitimations in which the problem of theodicy is solved not only by scenes of creation and salvation but also by the symbolic use of the tree as hierophany and "cinematography as theophany".

3. "Miracles are Love. Miracles are God": The Miracle-Giver Cosmic Tree in the Garden in *Miracles from Heaven*

One of the films that depict suffering as an outcome of an anomic situation along with a portrayal of the sacred tree is *Miracles from Heaven* (2016) directed by Patricia Riggen. Just like Malick, Riggen in *Miracles from Heaven* zooms into the lives of a Texas family with three kids. Based on a real story²³ written in a memoir by Christy Beam, the film presents the troubles that a family goes through upon the news about their daughter's fatal illness. The Beams who lead a faithful and blissful life in a loving and supporting community begin to go through hard times when their ten-year-old daughter is diagnosed with pseudo-obstruction motility disorder that is a rare incurable disease. After the long terms of treatment by a compassionate and skilled doctor in a children's hospital, the

²³ In addition to the memoir *Miracles from Heaven* (2015) there are lots of interviews or programs in which the mother Christy (sometimes also accompanied by other family members) talks about their miraculous story. One who is curious about what happened in real life and how the film depicts reality may have a look at the memoir or those interviews most of which are available on YouTube or have a look at Lang's "Miracles from Heaven: History vs. Hollywood". This study is not interested in reality vs. representation; although at this point it should be noted that the girl really fell into the hollow tree in real life. This study is only interested in how this film *depicts* the sacred tree. Also, there were some moments in which I had to check the memoir; for instance, I would comment on the symbolic dimensions of some characters such as "Christy" symbolizing her faith or "Angela" symbolizing her angelic approach but these are the real names of the real characters so such comments are avoided.

medicine falls short of offering healing. Towards the end of the film, Anna falls to a hollow tree and miraculously heals after a near-death experience. At first glance, Anna's recovery poses a different plotline from that of *The Tree of Life* and *The Fountain* since R. L. was dead in *The Tree of Life* and Izzi is dead in *The Fountain* and those films engage in the ways to process grief after facing anomy of death. In addition to this difference in plot, the narrative style of this faith-based film is different: the linear easy-to-follow narration contrasts the nonlinear, complex, and hard-to-follow narrative styles of *The Tree of Life* and *The Fountain*. Also, in contrast to many academic sources on *The Tree of Life* and *The Fountain*, there is nearly no academic interest in *Miracles from Heaven* except a couple of undergraduate theses and an article that criticizes the film for creating false hope in its representation of disability (Lane, 2022)²⁴. Despite those differences, *Miracles from Heaven*, like the other two films, touches upon the same spiritual crisis that emanates from the human need to find meaning in the cosmos while grappling with agony, and the sacred tree emerges as a dominant motif throughout the film in the depiction of this crisis. The central role of the tree as a motif is further depicted in the film's poster (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Poster for the Film *Miracles from Heaven*. Retrieved from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4257926/mediaviewer/rm3167558657/?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_8

²⁴ As already stated in the footnote in the beginning of the analysis of *The Tree of Life*, I worked on a comparative study on *Miracles from Heaven* to *The Tree of Life* that was published in *Dokuz Eylül University The Journal of Graduate School of Social Sciences* in 2021.

Miracles from Heaven, which can be considered a touching emotional example of the faith-based films genre, delineates anomy not through the depiction of the grief period in which the family members mourn for their loss but through a portrayal of both physically and psychologically hard times of a little cute girl suffering a deathly disease and her miraculous healing. The story in which the problem of suffering is dissolved miraculously at the end is composed of touching dialogues at their farmhouse and hospitals. All those scenes in the house, farm, and hospitals repeatedly cut into the big hollow tree on their farm. Like the oak tree in *The Tree of Life*, this tree in the garden of the Beams' farm visually dominates most of the film appearing as *axis mundi* or theophany and its dominance is very clear in its portrayal in the beginning and end of the film.

In the opening sequence, following the information that the film is based on real events, the camera starts shooting the tree from a low angle. The leafless old tree is at the center, on both sides, there are branches with green leaves of other trees and the low-angle shot makes a clear bright sky visible at the above realm. While the camera shoots the tree, Christy in voice-over says, "When I was growing up, people didn't really talk about miracles" (Riggen, 2016). The shots of the *axis mundi* tree in the farm are followed by another shot of woods that depicts several trees some of which have intersecting branches (thereby forming hardly noticeable cross signs) and the sparkling yellow light from the background reflects upon a small puddle on the ground. This scene not only provides water tree association (that is also available in the other films) but also highlights the connection between here (earth) and there (sky) already established in the earlier scene showing the tree at the farm in front of a blue sky. As this depiction of the woods is followed by those of the farm, showing either the animals and the greenery outside or Christy working on the flowers on the farm inside, the voice-over goes on "I am not sure I understood what they were or if I believed in them. A miracle is defined as something not explicable by natural or scientific laws. But then how do you explain it? How does it happen? Who or what is behind it" (Riggen, 2016). The last question posed in the voice-over shows the leafless branches of the *axis mundi* tree again while the sun sparkles in the sky. This moment is reminiscent of the moments in *The Tree of Life* in which the characters ask questions and the camera shows a sparkling fire or the sun to stand for a transcendental deity. At this moment of the film, it is as if the sun (or the director) is answering the question of who is behind the miracles among the branches of the *axis mundi* tree. This opening

sequence in voice-over narration of miracles highlights the significance of the cosmic tree and the sun.

Following the opening sequence, the film delves into the lives of the Beams and how their blissful family life is interrupted by the anomaly of Anna's illness. The scene in which the family learns the details of Anna's excruciating illness at Fort Worth Hospital, maintains the idea of transcendence using images of opening. As the Beams with their acquaintances wait for Anna to get out of the operation at the hospital, Mr. and Mrs. Beam are called to another hall to be informed about the operation. As the pastor prays with the other children in the waiting hall, there is a crosscut to a skylight—a window on the ceiling in the shape of a circle through which a bright sky is visible—in the other hall. Then we see the doctor informing the mother and father about Anna's illness. In this hall, in the right corner, stairs are reaching above and sometimes the camera makes the windows on the higher floor visible. As the doctor talks about Anna's severe intestinal motility disorder and mentions Dr. Nurko, a pediatrician and a motility expert at Boston, the camera zooms into Mrs. Beam who starts to lift her head slightly and looks above. From Mrs. Beam's face, the camera cuts to the skylight as the doctor says "he might be able to help. I don't want to give you false hope" (Riggen, 2016). Then there is another close-up of the mother's face followed by her leaving the hall. Her departure from the hall is given in a high-cam angle through which the shape of the hall—a circle parallel to the skylight above—is clearly seen. Thereby, the image of opening provides parallelism between here and there, unfolding how the humans here below need to find hope or guidance there above. The images of openings such as the stairs, windows, and especially the skylight provide micro-macro connections.

This skylight brings to mind the low-cam shot of a magnificent image of an opening in a church scene in *The Tree of Life*, a shot in The Chapel of Thanksgiving in Texas – the image of stained-glass windows running to a center at the top in a spiral shape beautifully indicating eternity and emphasizing micro-macro ties. Moreover, the circular patterns are like the circles of light that Izzi is situated in the museum scenes in *The Fountain*. The circle in that museum scene depicts Izzi fainting which indicates her transformation and her newly earned ability to grasp the inevitable death, which is not an end but a beginning. The images of opening in the hospital scene in *Miracles from Heaven* indicate

both the denial of anomic death and the need to remain faithful and to ask for transcendent divine help.

The most dramatic and heartrending moments of *Miracles from Heaven* arise in the scenes where Anna suffers from severe pain. In addition to the physical agony, Anna is psychologically devastated. After she returns from Fort Worth Hospital, she is worn out and starts tubal feeding. Following a scene that depicts her inability to fit into her pants due to her swollen belly, she asks her “why God hasn’t healed me?” (Riggen, 2016). This remark clarifies the problem of suffering: why an innocent god-loving child suffers. Anna cannot understand but especially the mother is beginning to question her child’s affliction together with the conceptualization of a transcendental God.

This disease especially puts the mother Christy in a spiritual crisis evidently more than Anna. Christy who carefully listens to each of her children’s night prayers before bedtime later loses her faith and witnessing Anna’s torment becomes unable to pray. The crisis in faith becomes apparent, especially in the scene in which Christy, after a failed attempt to reach Dr. Nurko and having learned that she has to “wait for someone to die and just pray that Anna doesn’t go before that” (Riggen, 2016), she goes out of the house and sits on the front stairs. The camera, in a low-angle shot of Christy, the tree, and the sky captures Christy looking at the sky. (Figure 12) Then the low-cam cuts to a high-cam depicting Christy from above along with visible branches of the tree in which Christy still looking above asks, “Do you even hear me?” (Riggen, 2016) (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Christy and the Tree from a Low Angle. Screenshot from *Miracles from Heaven* (Riggen, 2016)



Figure 13. The Tree and Christy from a High Angle. Screenshot from *Miracles from Heaven* (Riggen, 2016)

It is followed by a closeup of crying Christy still looking up and saying

“cause I don’t hear you” (Riggen, 2016). Even though Christy, facing an anomic situation, is on the brink of a crisis in faith, the cut from high-cam to low-cam indicates the presence of a transcendental deity who is hearing the cries of this individual. This moment in which Christy poses a question to a transcendental power is reminiscent of Mrs. O’Brien’s repeated callings to God in voice-over narrations. The low-angle shots of the tree in Beam’s garden are similar to the shots of the tree in O’Brien’s garden. In *The Tree of Life*, repeated camera shots of the trees from below in low angles reaching up to the clouds imply the cosmic significance of the tree as an intermediary between different realms relating the human earthly existence to the upward divine residence. In *Miracles from Heaven*, there are similar uses of low-angle shots of the tree.

The problem of suffering dominates the whole film. Even though Christy answers Anna’s question on why God has not healed her as “there are so many things I don’t know but I know God loves you” (Riggen, 2016) at the beginning of the film, she poses a similar question to Pastor Scott later at the church: “why a loving God would let Anna suffer the way she does” (Riggen, 2016). Similar to Christy’s answer to Anna, Pastor Scott assures the significance of believing in a loving god: “Just because she is sick doesn’t mean that there isn’t a loving God. Let me tell you the lowest points of my life. I have tried it both ways. I did everything that I can to connect to God or walk away. And in my experience, one feels a whole lot better than the other” (Riggen, 2016). From this perspective, the problem of suffering is attempted to be resolved by reminding the existence of an all-loving God or how the faith eases the pain.

There is also another incident that makes Christy furious. Having misinterpreted Pastor Scott’s sermon about the need to try to get back on track in an unhappy situation by asking the questions “Have I sinned? Have I drifted astray?” two female parishioners relate this misfortune befalling onto the Beams to sin. They advise Christy to think about some difficult questions about whose sins, (Christy’s, Kevin’s, or even Anna’s) are preventing Anna from healing. In his article “Suffering, Prayer, and Miracles,” Paul P. Parker focuses on the commonly held association between suffering and sin in relation to Jesus and his disciples’ encounter with a blind man: “When Jesus and his band came upon a blind man, his disciples initiated a discussion on a contemporary theological issue: Whose fault was it? ‘As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from

birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?’ (Jn 9: 1-2)” (Parker, 1997, p. 212). Parker outlines that this association between suffering and sin indicated by Jesus’ disciples is still prevalent today:

The only theological debate in this situation was over whether the cause had been the parents’ sin (Ex 20:5), the blind man’s sin of watching parents in sexual intercourse while still in the womb, or a singularly heinous sin that the man would have committed if not born blind.⁵ Who then sinned?

Folks are not so different today. When things sour, when a loved one’s undiagnosed cancer grows beyond the stage of treatment though the symptoms were apparent to everyone months earlier, when the over-weight and sedentary man is disabled by a stroke, when starvation devours hundreds of millions in a world of plenty, when urban rot consumes a city’s heart, when nations sacrifice their young for the prizes of war, the first response is recrimination. Who did it? Who is responsible? (Parker, 1997, p. 212).

At this point, Jesus’s answer to his disciples holds the utmost significance. Referring to Jesus’s answer as “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him,” Parker explains how Jesus was uninterested in his disciples’ theological debate or fault-finding (1997, pp. 212-213). Parker comments “While in no way minimizing the blind man’s suffering and without any attempt to justify it, Jesus taught that his suffering had cosmic significance” (1997, p. 213). Jesus’s approach to the suffering of the blind man is a significant means to think about Anna’s suffering in *Miracles from Heaven* since this little girl’s suffering is not related to sin but holds a cosmic value. Just like disciples, these two parishioners relate Anna’s suffering to the sins of a member of the Beams including possibly those of this little innocent girl. Pastor Scott’s response to this unfortunate dialogue between Christy and parishioners “I sure wish that I could give everybody a spiritual IQ test before they walk through the door” (Riggen, 2016) reveals that Pastor Scott, just like Jesus, does not believe in a roughly sketched link between misfortune and sin. Anna’s suffering and her miraculous healing hold a cosmic value.

To understand the cosmic significance of suffering in *Miracles from Heaven*,

it is necessary to analyze the scene of Anna's fall into the tree in their garden that is followed by the scenes of her heavenly ascent and her miraculous healing later. Christy finds a way to reach Dr. Nurko; however, the treatment in Boston Hospital does not work, and the family returns to their Texas home. As the kids are playing in front of the tree, a butterfly flies and lands on the upper part of the tree. After gazing at the butterfly, Anna and her sister decide to climb the tree (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Anna and Her Sister Climbing the Tree. Screenshot from *Miracles from Heaven* (Riggen, 2016)

They sit on a branch of the tree but when the branch cranks, they move to get to a safer place and this movement ends up with Anna's fall inside the tree. The fact that the place she falls is a hollow trunk of a tree holds a symbolic significance. In fact, like the trees in both *The Fountain* and *The Tree of Life*, the tree in *Miracles from Heaven* emerges as an important cosmic symbol, an *axis mundi* connecting this world to an otherworldly realm. Referring to the biblical tree of life, the tree symbolically results in pondering on life, death, and rebirth. In addition, in both *The Tree of Life* and *Miracles from Heaven*, there are sequences showing the children climbing the tree or shots of a swing hanging from the tree. This brings to mind Eliade's analysis of trees that appear to be protectors watching over the lives of tiny children (1958, p. 306). At first glimpse, this life-threatening fall into the tree does not look like a form of protection; however, Anna's miraculous healing after being rescued impressively indicates how the fall is a protection or a miracle. The bodily position of Anna inside the hollow tree trunk as a fetus is a potent image of rebirth and regeneration foreshadowing her cosmic voyage. Terrified to witness Anna's fall, Christy who has been unable to pray, touches the tree trunk and starts to say "My Father who is in heaven" prayer. Later, other family members and friends accompany Christy praying in

front of the tree. Christy's touch clarifies that the tree is either the medium to communicate with the deity who "is in heaven" or the theophany. This moment also indicates Christy's change; she is now ready to pray to face the anomaly. After being rescued from the tree, she is sent to a hospital and the doctor tells the Beams that Anna is okay and he has not seen anything like that in his 25-year career. Therefore, Anna's survival from such a fall is a miracle from the perspective of science as well.

After the fall, Anna begins healing: she does not need any medication anymore, she is more energetic and her belly is flat. She explains how she is healed to her parents describing what happened when she was lying unconscious inside the tree. When she hit first, everything went black, she says, and then she explains her out-of-body experience as weird because she could see her body but she was not in it. As Anna narrates the details of her heavenly ascent, the camera depicts those moments. She sees a butterfly that flies on the trunk and as soon as she touches it, she is welcomed to a beautiful and awesome heaven with sunrises, colorful flowers, butterflies, white clouds, and an alluring pond. From this perspective, the tree is a boundary between this world and heaven and the butterfly is her guide in her heavenly ascent. First, she walks along a small path in the heavenly woods looking above at the long trees and sky, then touches the flowers and with her touch, the petals turn to flying butterflies. Once again, Anna looks at the flying butterflies in a beautiful blue sky and sees white stingrays swimming in the sky. The stingrays in the sky is another reference to an earlier moment in the film in which Anna looks at a stingray in an aquarium. Joyfully running, she tries to touch the stingrays that are depicted like moving/swimming white clouds. Running, she reaches a beautiful pond whose surface reflects the fascinating and glamorous colors of the trees and greeneries nearby. Such a heavenly vision provides water tree association in the sacred realm throughout this scene.

This colorful heaven scene is a reference to an earlier scene in the film in which Anna, Christy, and Angela go to a museum in Boston and see a beautiful painting, one from Monet's *Water Lilies* series. First, the three gaze upon the painting and then Anna stands up and has a closer look. The painting, which includes an impressionistic depiction of lilies and the reflections of clouds on the surface of the pond, further emphasizes the above-below relations and maintains a feeling of transcendence. The scene uses a dissolve transition in which Anna's

close-up revealing her beautiful blue eyes, cross necklace, and pink sweater is repeatedly superimposed on blue, purple, and pink colors in Monet's painting. This moment indicates how Anna is processing the idea of transcendence beautifully portrayed in the painting.

Monet's *Water Lilies* series contains paintings that depict impressionistic portrayals of Monet's home Waterlily Pond at Giverny. Dr Ayla Lepine in a YouTube Video answers the question of why one of the paintings in the series makes some people cry and explains how the painting stands for transcendence and becomes a symbol of hope (the National Gallery, 2022):

This painting inspires awe for people and that can be surprising for them. I don't know whether or not that would have surprised Monet, but perhaps that was among other things, that kind of effect that he was really after. So, first of all, what is transcendence? This is for many a complex word and maybe we can think about it in terms of awe, wonder, something that takes us beyond ourselves. Some people associate it with the sacred, a spiritual experience. Something that connects them more deeply to their religion or their faith. Some aspect of themselves that seems to deepen in the presence of beauty, in particular, and of maybe a multi-sensory kind of encounter where not only do they come more deeply into their own bodies, their minds, their hearts, but also for some they might find a deeper connection with the divine. Regardless of anyone's beliefs or practices or experiences, one of the things that I notice is that when people come and gather at this painting, they spend time with it. There is a quality of closer looking, patience, and a search for peace. (the National Gallery, 2022)

Lepine's remarks about the general response to this painting are similar to Christy's, Angelo's, and especially Anna's response. As Lepine explains, Monet was facing anomic situations when he was painting the series; his wife passed away, and there was a terrible war (the First World War) that resulted in so many deaths. His paintings depicting the beauties of nature create a sense of transcendence and become symbols of hope (the National Gallery, 2022). According to Lepine, that was Monet's way of processing anomy. Monet's response to the anomic situation can help Anna make sense of her anomic situation. In addition, Anne's gaze into the painting is interrupted by a miracle, a phone call to Christy informing her that

Anna has an appointment with Dr. Nurko.

The colorful heaven she describes in her heavenly journey—the major miracle— is just like Monet’s painting. The colors of the painting are identical to the colors in heaven and heaven, just like Monet’s painting, portrays the beauty of nature. When Anna reaches the pond, the camera from a high angle shows Anna looking at the pond and then standing on the surface of the pond. In her next step, the reflections of the clouds on the pond surface become the clouds above indicating her ascent to the sky in heaven. This scene not only illustrates Anna’s ascent but also strengthens the idea of transcendence in which different realms of cosmology reflect upon and relate to each other. Walking along the clouds, she hears the words “I love you” floating towards a yellow light leaking through the clouds in the middle of the sky. The sentence “I love you” is reminiscent of the early dialogues that her suffering should not eradicate the presence of a loving God. Then she says, she communicated with God without saying any words: “I said I wanted to stay but he said he needed me to come back. And he told me that when I came back, I will be healed. So, I asked him if he was a hundred percent sure because I don’t wanna come back unless he is right” (Riggen, 2016). The words “he needed me to come back” indicate that Anna’s suffering, just like the suffering of the blind man according to Jesus, has a cosmic significance illustrating the presence of a transcendental heavenly deity.

The cosmic significance of Anna’s suffering and healing after a heavenly ascent is later signified in Christy’s speech about the significance of Anna’s miracle in particular and miracles in general at the church. Christy, wearing a butterfly-patterned dress, becomes a butterfly-like guiding figure for interpreting Anna’s experience of miracles. In her speech, Christy first identifies her feelings that arise with the problem of suffering: “when Anna got sick I just couldn’t understand it why was this devoted God-loving little girl going through this. I felt hopeless. I felt alone. I was angry that our prayers weren’t being answered. I lost my faith because of that, I didn’t see what was all around me” (Riggen, 2016). Then Christy assures that miracles are real and everywhere: “Albert Einstein said there are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. And the other is as though everything is a miracle. I wasn’t living my life as though everything is a miracle. I missed a lot” (Riggen, 2016). As Christy goes on with her speech saying “Miracles are everywhere” (Riggen, 2016) the camera cuts to the butterfly that flies on the hollow tree in a low-angle

shot making the tree stand high, and then Anna looking at the sun that shines through its branches. This flashback to the time right before Anna's fall makes sense because that is the major miracle in the film but not the only one. In addition, the medium through which miracles come true is not only a heavenly God but also earthly humans who are affectionate and support the suffering people. Christy says, "Miracles are goodness, sometimes showing up in the strangest ways through people who are just passing through our lives" (Riggen, 2016). The scene in which Christy mentions people passing through their lives is intercut with images showing people who help them in this hard process mostly in flashback forms. Among them are Anna's friend who supports Anna at school, Angela who accompanies Anna and Christy with her warm heart whenever they come to Boston for treatment, the employee at the airplane who makes it possible for Mr. Beam and the other two children to fly to Boston despite the lack of credit in Mr. Beam's credit card, the receptionist at Boston Children's Hospital who even risks her position by trying to find an appointment with Dr. Nurko whose schedule is overloaded, and Christy's friend who is always there for her whenever she needs. Then Christy says, "Miracles are love. Miracles are God" (Riggen, 2016). Also, Christy admits that she knows miracles do not happen to each suffering person: "Why was Anna healed when today around the world there are so many children suffering? I don't know the answer but after everything I have been through, I have realized I am not alone, and whatever you may be going through I am here to tell you, you are not alone. Miracles are God's way of letting us know he's here" (Riggen, 2016). Christy is aware that miracles do not save every suffering human.

Probably, it would be easier for someone whose problem is miraculously solved to come up with meanings out of suffering in this world. However, innocent children are dying in pain and amid this painful reality how can one justify God's ways or how may belief in a transcendental divinity be restored under such circumstances? Even though *Miracles from Heaven* focuses on the role of miracles, it does not fall short of answering such questions. The answers come from a character named Ben, the father of Haley who is befriended by Anna in Boston Children's Hospital. Haley and Anna share the same room and Anna gives a necklace in the shape of a cross to Haley as a present to remind the existence of Jesus and God whenever she feels afraid. Ben is among the audience at the church during Christy's speech about miracles and when Christy is accused of the possibility that the story about Anna is a hoax. Ben supports

Christy saying even though he has never been a religious person, he can see how much believing in an all-loving divinity makes a difference for the suffering: “My beautiful daughter died recently. Her name was Haley and she was 10. She had cancer and she suffered a great deal. But the last weeks of her life were different. She felt safe. She felt loved. She felt God and she felt that way because Anna gave her faith, she gave her peace” (Riggen, 2016). Thus, as Ben indicates, belief in an all-loving transcendental deity gives strength to suffering humans. This is similar to Max Weber’s reading of the book of Job implying that humans cannot understand the unlimited power of God (discussed in the previous part about the sermon on Job at the church in *The Tree of Life*). *Miracles from Heaven* has a message that unless suffering is miraculously averted, belief in God rather than questioning his ways is a better option for the suffering.

The film ends with a scene in which the Beams enjoy pizza in their garden. The ending is touching because when Anna first shows symptoms of her illness, in the beginning, there is another scene in which all family members agree not to eat pizza to make Anna feel not alone in her hard times. The pizza reunion at the end is sometimes shot from a high angle revealing the house, the tree, and the Beams together enjoying pizza at an outside table. This high-angle shot indicates that God is still watching the family. In this high-angle shot, the sun shines through the branches of the hollow tree as Christy, in voice-over says “As you can see, now we live as if everything is a miracle because, for us, it is” (Riggen, 2016). Then the film cuts to the real Beam family members reminding that the plot is inspired by real events. Especially the sunflowers that real-life Christy works on symbolize that individuals like sunflowers are following a sun-like God. The sunflower is also used in a similar symbolic manner in *The Tree of Life*.

Miracles from Heaven deals with suffering by illustrating the traumas emanating from the deadly illness of a little girl. In this film, the problem of meaning-making in hard times is resolved by remembering the presence of an all-loving deity which is evident in the ways miracles come true. Rather than associating suffering with sin, humans may seek comfort in the conceptualization of a transcendental deity maintaining order in the cosmos. As opposed to *The Fountain* and *The Tree of Life*, death is averted and the anomy is resolved not with acceptance but through miracles. As in *The Fountain* and *The Tree of Life*, the tree emerges as a sacred space as an intermediary between an earthly realm and an upward realm. There are so many shots in which the sunlight passes

through the branches of long trees, but the hollow tree is the dominating one through which issues related to death and regeneration are portrayed. This hollow tree is multifaceted: a playground for children along with nearby balls, swing, bikes, an image of opening through which communication with the above realm is provided, an *axis mundi*, a center that reaches the above realm and helps humans to make sense of their presence on earth, or a theophany in which the transcendent god resides and control the cosmos.

CONCLUSION

In *The Fountain*, *The Tree of Life*, and *Miracles from Heaven*, the tree emerges as a symbol of sacred that holds a religious function of providing meaning for those confronted with anomic situations. The ideas on the sacred mainly by Mircea Eliade and Peter Berger, as extensively used in the mythological approach in the studies on religion and cinema, provide the theoretical framework in the examination of the mythical tree in these films. The tree impressively appears in all three films as a symbol of regeneration and as an image of opening or *axis mundi* enabling a sense of transcendency. The introduction of this study, which promises an analysis of this symbolic sacred tree based on narrative and style, finalizes with several questions. It is a good idea to answer each question in detail in the conclusion.

The first question is “How does death appear as a part of plots?”. In *The Fountain*, it is Izzi’s death that traumatizes both Izzi and Tom. The film depicts the pain and anger that dying and death trigger. Izzi has to learn to await and accept dying while Tom, Izzi’s neuroscientist husband has to learn to accept Izzi’s death. In *The Tree of Life*, the protagonist Jack remembers his past to give meaning to his presence, and in his past the most upsetting experience, the anomaly is the death of his brother. This anomaly leads not only Jack but also all the family members to despair. Especially present in the voice-overs, the family is traumatized by the reality of death, questioning why there is suffering on earth. The film, further integrating the story of the Biblical Job, includes an interesting discussion of the problem of suffering or theodicy. In *Miracles from Heaven*, ten-year-old Anna, a member of the Beams family is diagnosed with pseudo-obstruction motility disorder. This film differs from the other two films since Anna recovers through a divine miracle. Still, the film richly engages in the

problem of suffering.

Death appears as an anomic force in these film plots that are adorned with trees holding a symbolic cosmic value. This leads to the answer to the next question “Which mythical trees do the films refer to?” All three films use the mythical Tree of Life to ponder its symbolic connotation with death and regeneration. In *The Fountain*, Xibalba in Mayan mythology is further explicated but, in the three films, the tree is an extension of the mythical Tree of Life, as also evident in the Tree of Life in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Mircea Eliade examines in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, the motif of the Tree of Life through which the issue of im/mortality is metaphorically investigated takes place in various mythological and religious patterns. In all three films, the trees referring to the mythical Tree of Life appear as *axis mundi* and a hierophany further explicating the human endeavor to make sense of their mortality.

Answering the next question “How does the tree as a symbol of sacred appear as a part of narrative and style?” is essential at this point. In *The Fountain*, the role of the mythical Tree of Life is signaled in the very beginning in the epigraph that refers to the biblical Tree of Life guarded with a flaming sword. Furthermore, the tree is thematically and visually dominant as a main character. In the nonlinear complex structure of *The Fountain*, the tree appears in each plotline. The conquistador Thomas is trying to find the tree of life to give the queen immortality, the neuroscientist Tom is trying to use the bark of a specific tree to cure his wife as Izzi searches for the meanings of the mythical cosmic tree, and the space traveler travels with a dying tree trying to keep it alive. In the end, as the conquistador becomes the tree (Figure 4) and the space traveler uses the tree as a ladder, ascends, and transcends into the cosmos (Figure 2), present-day Tom learns to make sense of his agony. Even though not as visually vivid and dominant as the trees in *The Fountain*, the trees in *The Tree of Life* are cosmic images providing transcendence. The title of the film already stresses how the mythical tree is the dominating symbol in thinking about death, dying, grief, and agony. There is an oak tree in O’Brien’s garden (Figure 7) that the children joyfully climb and play. This tree in Jack’s memories of childhood days runs parallel to the tree in front of present-day Jack’s office at a skyscraper (Figure 10). In addition, repeated low-cam tree shots enhance the idea that the earthly problems of suffering are solved once gazed at a transcendent cosmic structure. In *Miracles from Heaven*, the tree in the Beam’s farm (Figures 12 &

13) is actually the miracle-giver since Anna heals after she falls into the trunk of this tree. Similar to the trees in *The Fountain*, this tree has a leading role visually, constantly shot throughout the film. Like *The Tree of Life*, this tree is also a plaything of children (Figure 14); thus, the tree not only offers children joy but also healing miracles. In addition, in *Miracles from Heaven*, the tree at the farm signifies a boundary in which Anna moves from the earthly realm into the heavenly woods after her fall.

Moreover, the tree symbolism is associated with water symbolism in each film; Eliade in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* mentions this water tree association in the symbolism of regeneration with references to different mythical and religious traditions. In *The Fountain*, as the conquistador walks to the mythical Tree of Life, the camera shows the tree amid a pool/fountain (Figure 3). The title of this film actually indicates the water element, and the conquistador walks on water toward the *axis mundi* tree situated at the center of the frame. In addition, the water tree association is manifest in *The Tree of Life*; the water is symbolically used both in the creation sequence at the beginning and in the salvation scene at the mystical shoreline at the end. Moreover, water elements such as seas, oceans, waterfalls, water flowing from hoses or sprinkles accompany images of trees or greeneries throughout the film. Furthermore, *Miracles from Heaven* pleasantly depicts the water tree association in the Monet-like heaven in which Anna amazingly looks at the reflections of heavenly woods onto the surface of the heavenly pond.

The trees, both as parts of the dialogues in narration and as visual images are abundantly presented in these films, and they appear as hierophanies since they signify a transcendent reality for the characters. That is how the trees are symbolically significant for initiating a change or an awareness for the protagonists. Thus, it is a good time to think about the question “Do the characters change, and learn to make sense of death and suffering, and if so, how?” posed in the introduction. Berger explains how marginal situations disrupt the meaningful order and in each film, death and dying emerge as the marginal situation. In addition, signified by the symbolic relation of the mythical Tree of Life to regeneration, the protagonists process pain and suffering. This process or change, reminiscent of the monomyth in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is illustrated in the motif journey in which the hero returns changed. In *The Fountain*, Izzi learns to accept dying once she sees death as

“an act of creation” and “a road to awe” inspired by the story about the death of Moses Morales’s father who becomes the tree and once the sparrows eat the fruit of the tree, the father flies and extends into the cosmos. Izzi is not afraid because death is a “road” in the regenerative cosmos. Likewise, the space traveler’s journey into space and his ascent from his space bubble/eggshell together with the tree is an experience of transcendence and is a metaphor for Tom’s change. No longer seeing death as “a disease,” learning to accept death as a part of the regenerating cosmos, he buries a seed into his wife’s grave, sending her off on her “road to awe”. In *The Tree of Life*, Jack walks repeatedly passing through many thresholds and, at the end of the film, reaches the mystical shorelines of salvation in which he reunites with his brother. He walks and he is not alone, the mother also walks toward the shorelines and together they reach salvation that is how Malick metaphorically depicts how Jack and the mother learn to make sense of their suffering. In *Miracles from Heaven*, the journey motif emerges in Anna’s heavenly ascent after she falls into the cosmic tree. This film is different from the others because this journey results in a miracle and she is literally, not figuratively, regenerated but there is a cosmic significance in her journey that reveals that there are miracles in life.

In each film, the nomos or the meaningful order of life is disrupted by the anomy of death but the protagonists’ perceptions of death change along with the mythical Tree of Life that stands symbolically for regeneration. The stylistic choices further maintain the idea of transcendence that enables the protagonists’ changing perceptions. At this point, it is wise to think about the last question on style in the introduction “How do the choices in cinematography and mise-en-scene contribute to portraying sacred and transcendence?”. The second part of the study including film analyses further directs attention to how some of the stylistic choices such as the angle and distance of the camera, direction of light, color contrast, a change of palette, and transitions may contribute to the depiction of especially transcendence. These three films have different overall styles; however, in general terms, the transcendence is stylistically maintained by the camera work that provides micro-macro relations. Peter Berger examines the micro-macro relations in which the earthly realm is linked to the transcendent above realm as legitimizing agencies through which anomies disrupting the meaningful order are interpreted in a cosmological framework. Such micro-macro relations are further suggested through style in these films.

One of the stylistic ways to depict micro-macro relations is maintained by the camera angles, especially in the low and high camera angles. In *The Fountain*, the close-ups of Izzi and Tomás /Tommy/Tom looking at the above realm in high-angle shots and the low-angle shot of the characters that situate them in their earthly sufferings or the low-angle shot of the rings of Xibalba that extends into the whole cosmos are among the scenes that reveal above-below relations. In *The Tree of Life*, the low-angle shot of trees, skyscrapers, and the stained-glass window in a spiral shape provides the idea of transcendence amazingly. Moreover, the camera angles attract attention in the scenes shooting Jack. For instance, the scene in which Jack is shot from a high angle at his office on the highest floors of a skyscraper indicates how little he is despite his success and privileged position. The low-angle shot of Jack in front of the doorframe whose face is washed with the lights from the sun above before his walk into the shorelines hints at a grasp of transcendence. Such alternating low- and high-angle shots situate Jack in a cosmic drama. In *Miracles from Heaven*, low-angle shots of the cosmic tree in the garden and other trees are repeated throughout the film. Furthermore, the high-angle shots of the Beams not only situate them in a cosmic frame but also give a sense of a form of all-loving divinity watching from above, and the low-angle shots of especially the mother depict how she searches for answers to the problem of suffering. Furthermore, in both *The Tree of Life* and *Miracles from Heaven* there are repeated images of the sun shining through the branches of the trees or glistening on the protagonists' faces and those images stylistically put the human suffering on earth extends to a cosmic scale. In this cosmic scale, the sun stands for the above divinity.

Another way to stress micro-macro relations is by depicting what Eliade calls images of opening, mostly from low camera angles indicating how they connect the two realms. The trees are the most significant images of opening but there are other images of openings such as doors, windows, bridges, and sunflowers. Those images of opening not only signify the boundary between inside and outside but also essentially below and above provided by the camera angles. Those images extend the boundaries of earthly sufferings to a vast cosmos thereby objectifying the characters' subjective situations.

Micro-macro relations are also provided by parallelism. For instance, the parallelism between a brain cell image under the microscope and the movements in the sky (Pisters, 2010, p. 248) in *The Fountain*, the parallelism between the

cloud-like forms in a nebula and cloud-like DDT sprayed by the truck on the streets of Waco (Plate, 2012, p. 6), and the parallelism between Monet painting and the heaven in which different cosmological realms reflect upon each other (sky reflected on the surface of the water) in *Miracles from Heaven* are among the best scenes that relate the earthly events to the above realm. All those moments that weave micro-macro relations through different techniques serve to highlight how the earthly suffering concerning death and dying may be legitimated once put in a cosmic framework.

How these micro-macro relations are drawn in films is an issue elaborated by S. Brent Plate, one of the scholars working on religion and film in the third wave mentioned in the introduction of this study. Plate, taking attention to Peter Berger's analysis of the legitimating power of religion, asserts that cinema in its depictions of micro-macro relations comes forward as a legitimating institution as well (2012, p. 3). Plate quotes Berger's lines as

Religion legitimates social institutions by . . . locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. . . . Probably the most ancient form of this legitimation is the conception of the relationship between society and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm. Everything 'here below' has its analogue "up above." By participating in the institutional order, humans participate in the divine cosmos. (qtd. in Plate, 2012, p. 3)

Then Plate invites the readers to reread Berger's lines changing the word "religion" to "film production companies to show the affinity between religion and cinema:

Film production companies legitimate cinema by . . . locating films within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. . . . Probably the most ancient form of this legitimation is the conception of the relationship between society and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm. Everything "here below" has its analogue "up above." By participating in the cinematic order, humans participate in the divine cosmos. (2012, p. 3)

Plate, whose studies on religion and cinema concentrate on reception, highlights that in their depictions of micro and macro relations, religion and cinema are alike and, from this perspective, the believers of a religious tradition are similar to the

audience who are provided with schemas of meaning through these institutions. Plate's comparison not only interprets texts (above quote from Berger) but also visuals; he compares a screenshot from *The Tree of Life* to the Universal Studios Logo both of which depict Earth in the cosmos. He finalizes with the following words:

Cinema is part of the symbol-creating apparatus of culture, yet it also aspires to more: to world-encompassing visions of the nomos and cosmos. Cinema allows us to see in new ways, through new technologies, re-creating the world anew, telescoping the macrocosmic past and far away, and bringing these visions to bear on the microcosmic structures in the here and now. Filmmakers, artists, scientists, authors, and the rest of us seek to legitimate personal stories and grander histories. Such legitimations are found in words, but equally so in images. By reviewing some historical imagery, we find new and very old ways of mythologizing, which is to say: finding our lives relevant beyond ourselves, in the past, present, and future, in word and image. (2012, p. 9)

Plate explains how the cinema as a “symbol-creating” apparatus depicts in both word and image legitimations of personal stories linking “macrocosmic past and far away” to “microcosmic structures in the here and now”.

Plate stresses the similarity between religion and cinema in his other studies as well. The introductions of both *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* and *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* begin with a similar maneuver to reiterate this affinity between films and religion in which Plate quotes from scholars of film studies and scholars of anthropology or religion. In *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, Plate quotes from theorists of religion such as Mary Douglas and Emile Durkheim and film scholars such as Bordwell and Thompson and Mast, Cohen, and Brody and in *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, he opens his introduction with references to film studies scholars Bordwell and Thompson (again) and anthropologist Myerhoff. Those references from religion studies and film studies are provided to draw attention to the similarities among filmmaking, mythmaking, meaning-making, and culture making.

Plate's studies fall into the mythological approach in the three-fold

categorization of studies on religion and films offered by Martin and Oswalt as mentioned in the introduction. Tenzan Eaghllle in the introduction “Three Film Critics Walk into a Theater: The Ideological Blindspot in the Academic Study of Religion and Film” to the book *Representing Religion in Film*, criticizes Plate as well as other scholars as J. C. Lyden and S. J. Nayar that he sees in the mythological approach for seeing religion as *sui generis*. Favoring the ideological approach, Eaghllle argues that the dominance of theological and mythological approaches over ideological approach “is not a mere theoretical oversight” and adds that “it is an active effort to maintain a certain hegemonic view of religion as *sui generis*—implying a unique, distinct, or sacred domain of meaning” (2022, p. 4). Even though Eaghllle appreciates Plate’s ideas for using “film studies methods to ground his study of religion in film” (2022, p. 17), he criticizes Plate and some other scholars in the mythological approach for ignoring the ideological elements.

Consequently, as offered by Martin and Oswalt, there are mainly three approaches in the studies that concentrate on religion and film: theological, mythological, and ideological. These approaches, sometimes criticizing each other, offer rich arguments to think about how the studies on religion and film intersect. With no attempt to privilege one approach over another, this study belongs to the mythological approach since it concentrates on films that depict the role of the mythical Tree of Life in films that portray the harshness of death, dying, and grief. In *The Fountain*, *The Tree of Life*, and *Miracles from Heaven* death appears as an anomy and the mythical Tree of Life emerges to provide meaning or nomos for the suffering characters, both as text and image with its connotations of regeneration and its capacity to form a hierophany.

There are autobiographical elements in each film that may signal the meaning-making processes of the directors or screen writers when they are confronted with death. How Aronofsky thought about death after the cancer diagnosis of his parents (Allen, 2017), how Malick struggled with the death of his own brother (Wickman 2013), and how Rigger was inspired by a memoir in which the mother wants to make sense of a miraculous healing right after suffering, can be considered as a sign for how meaning making and film making are associated. Moreover, as audience reception studies envisage, such films can trigger a meaning-making process for the audience.

The main approach of this study, grasping how both films and myth help

humans to understand human mortality, emanates from the question of how these films depict the contemporary human confrontation with the anomy of death in which the mythical sacred tree emerges both as text and image. The attempt to answer this question reveals that even though Eliade talks about the difference between *homo religiosus* and modern man, the traditional “system of the world” that Eliade works on in *The Sacred and the Profane* still resonates with the perception of humans in the twenty-first century. Both Eliade and Berger consider the effects of secularization and inevitably there are vital changes in the process of secularization; however, the patterns through which humans perceive themselves and their feelings as a part of society and the cosmos are reminiscent of the old times. The traditional “system of the world” reverberates in some senses in the minds of twenty-first-century humans. The mythical tree, as an element of the mythical traditional cosmology, signifies a break in the homogenous space and becomes a hierophany and through this hierophany, micro-macro relations within a vast transcendent cosmos become conspicuous. The mythical tree in the “dream factory” (Eliade, 1959, p. 205) as a motif, depicts the contemporary confrontation with death and, as a religious symbol, it brings meaning to human existence and “translat[ing] a human situation into cosmological terms” (Eliade, 1976, p. 350). Elucidating how religion offers legitimating solutions for anomy, Berger articulates that “the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it” (1967, p. 51). In *The Fountain*, *The Tree of Life*, and *Miracles from Heaven*, the banner is the mythical Tree of Life that is put in the hands of the characters as they walk toward death or grieve. This is how their anomic situations are translated into a vast cosmic framework in which earthly sufferings are linked to a transcendent cosmos.

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